

***Grace Notes: Stanley Kauffmann  
on Culture & the Arts***

**Edited by R. J. Cardullo**

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- & *The Woman in the Dunes*, by Kobo Abé (*New York Review of Books*, 14 Jan. 1965)
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## Acknowledgements

All of the material in *Grace Notes: Stanley Kauffmann on Culture & the Arts* originally appeared in the *New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, and the *New York Times*, except where noted. Permission to reprint these pieces came from Stanley Kauffmann himself, who during his long career always copyrighted his articles, reviews, and essays in his own name rather than the name of the publication in which they first appeared.

My deep gratitude goes out to the late Mr. Kauffmann and his wife, Laura, for their valuable support of and assistance on this project during the final years of their lives.

## Biography/Chronology: Stanley Jules Kauffmann

**Born** 24 April 1916 in New York City, the son of Joseph H. Kauffmann, a dentist, and Jeanette (Steiner) Kauffmann; one sibling, a sister, who pre-deceased him in 2012

**Died** 9 October 2013 in New York City

**Educated** in the public schools of New York City (including DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx) and at New York University (B.F.A. in drama, 1935)

**Married** 5 February 1943, to Laura (Cohen) Kauffmann (died in 2012); no children

## Positions

Actor-Stage Manager, Washington Square Players, New York, 1931-1941  
 Writer, producer, and director of a weekly radio serial for the Mutual Broadcasting Company, 1945-1946  
 Associate Editor, Bantam Books, 1949-1952  
 Editor-in-Chief, Ballantine Books, 1952-1956  
 Consulting Editor, Ballantine Books, 1957-1958  
 Editor, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959-1960  
 Film Critic, *New Republic*, 1958-1965, 1967-2013  
 Freelance Book Reviewer & Cultural Commentator, 1961-2013, for such publications as *Horizon*, *Commentary*, *Salmagundi*, *Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Theater*, and the *American Scholar*  
 Drama Critic, WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1965  
 Host, "The Art of Film," WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1967  
 Drama Critic, *New York Times*, 1966  
 Associate Literary Editor, *New Republic*, 1966-1967  
 Theater Critic, *New Republic*, 1969-1979  
 Professor of Drama, Yale University School of Drama, 1967-1973, 1977-1986  
 Distinguished Professor of English, York College, City University of New York, 1973-1976  
 Visiting Professor of Drama, City University of New York Graduate Center, 1976-1992  
 Theater Critic, *Saturday Review*, 1979-1985  
 Distinguished Visiting Professor of Theater and Film, Adelphi University, 1992-1996  
 Visiting Professor of Drama, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1993-2006

## Awards and Distinctions

Emmy for "The Art of Film," WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1964  
 Honorary Fellow, Morse College, Yale University, 1964-2013  
 Ford Foundation Fellow for Study Abroad, 1964 and 1971  
 Member, National Society of Film Critics, 1966-1971

Juror, National Book Awards, 1969, 1975  
 George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, 1972-1973  
 Member, Theater Advisory Panel, National Endowment for the Arts, 1972-1976  
 Member, Theater Advisory Panel, New York State Council on the Arts, 1977  
 Rockefeller Fellow, 1978  
 Guggenheim Fellow, 1979-1980  
 George Polk Award for Film Criticism, 1982  
 Edwin Booth Award for Significant Impact on Theater and Performance in New  
 York, 1986  
 Travel Grant from the Japan Foundation for Interest in and of Support of Japanese  
 Films, 1986  
 Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement, 1986  
 Fellow, New York Institute for the Humanities, 1995  
 Outstanding Teacher Award, Association for Theatre in Higher Education, 1995  
 Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism, 1999  
 "Film Culture: Past and Present," Symposium in Honor of Stanley Kauffmann,  
 sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at the City University of New  
 York Graduate Center, 2002  
 Featured in the documentary film *For the Love of Movies: The Story of American  
 Film Criticism*, 2009



## Master of Arts, or Critical Kauffmann: An Introduction, by R. J. Cardullo

Wolcott Gibbs, late of the *New Yorker*, once wrote the following of his experience as a film critic: “It is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum.”<sup>1</sup> Gibbs vowed that he would never review another movie, and he kept his promise.

As it happens, he quit movie reviewing just before the discovery that there was a market for European films in the United States. It was the 1946 box-office triumph in New York of Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* that opened the way for many low-budget Italian and French pictures. Even better ones began coming to America, from Asia as well as Europe, after the 1950 success of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*. These foreign films increasingly exposed the tinsel and cardboard of the indigenous product, but—more to the present point—they made the reviewing of movies a rewarding activity.

Stanley Kauffmann’s career as a film critic for the *New Republic* began not long afterward, in February of 1958—decades before the advent of simplified thumbs-up, thumbs-down reviewing popularized by television commentators like Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. Significantly, this was also the year in which *Agee on Film* was published (and reviewed by Kauffmann in the *New Republic*, as well as reprinted in this volume), and thus a year that marks the beginning of a change in general attitudes toward serious film criticism in the United States. Indeed, the 1960s and early 1970s were heady times for such criticism. Films, then, were being talked about in terms of art, and the central document of the time describing the general conversation was written in 1966 by Stanley Kauffmann and published in his very first collection of film criticism, *A World on Film* (also from 1966): it was titled “The Film Generation.” “There exists a Film Generation,” Kauffmann opined, “the first generation that has matured in a culture in which the film has been of accepted serious relevance, however that seriousness is defined.”<sup>2</sup> Kauffmann’s directly stated and cleanly structured essay was written in his characteristically precise, quietly professional style. Looking optimistically toward the future, “The Film Generation” supplied historical context and reasonable definition for the burgeoning American film culture.

In colleges and universities, in cafés, bars, theater lobbies, and their surrounding sidewalks, movies were then becoming the subject of heated debates. Neither moviegoing nor movie reviewing was new, as Kauffmann’s own *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to “Citizen Kane”* (1972) proved. But youthful hordes, uncomfortable with literature and not yet enslaved by television, now found something to get excited about in the cinema. More than ever before and perhaps ever since, they looked to critics to stimulate, shape, or confirm their opinions, and they gravitated toward the critics who best satisfied their individual bents.

The word “critics” refers to journalistic ones (as opposed to newspaper reviewers), not academics or scholars. It was the former group that led the fight to give film stature as art, and by the first few years of the 1970s this battle had been won. Virtually every college and university in America by then was offering film courses, and many had degree programs or were in the process of developing them. Yet with every new course, program, and treatise, ironically, the less relevant the writing of the pioneering journalistic critics became to the professors. Was this a case

of film education outdistancing the journalists, whose establishment had advanced middle age or beyond, and who had therefore ceased to grow intellectually? Or had the demand to achieve academic respectability killed off the love of movies in those film scholars, who, once drawn to motion pictures out of passion, were now burying them in mounds of hopelessly “scientific,” theoretical verbiage?

The split between the academics or scholars and the journalistic critics can best be understood in terms of classical and romantic temperaments: one deductive, starting with general principles and moving to specific examples, the other inductive, relying on each “text” to stimulate insights appropriate to it. And because of the strong French influence on academic thinking about film, it was unlikely then, in the mid-1970s, just as it is now, that American journalistic critics would adopt any of the academy’s viewpoints. For those viewpoints go against a longstanding American tradition. Leslie Fiedler put this issue best when he said something to the effect that no matter what they try to do, the French keep reinventing neoclassicism while the Americans keep reinventing romanticism.

Stanley Kauffmann himself once said something similar in a 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*: “The academic critics think of me as an impressionist, because I . . . deal experientially with film, deal with it analytically in terms of a highly personal set of ineffable standards. That is, I could not possibly codify for you what my beliefs are about film; it’s a matter of instances rather than precepts.”<sup>3</sup> For Kauffmann, the most fundamental quality of film criticism was not the code or theory behind it, but its moral rigor—its commitment to the art of film, passion to see it improve and be taken as seriously as any fine art, and disregard for any kind of popularity. It seems, then, that for the foreseeable future (and that future may be brief given the surfeit of Internet “chat” about the cinema) journalistic criticism of this kind will be at odds with academic film study. But the journalists still need to be read, especially in universities, if only to keep alive the romantic enthusiasm that brought professors to the cinema in the first place.

Where does Stanley Kauffmann stand among the journalistic critics? Though precise terminology is elusive, there were, at the time he became prominent, two kinds of critics: the “eggheads,” who preferred what were loosely called art films, and the populists, who “grooved” on Hollywood movies and their foreign counterparts where they could find them. The eggheads were Stanley Kauffmann, Dwight Macdonald, Vernon Young, and John Simon, with relatively few adherents. The populists were Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Manny Farber, with their legions of followers. In between, and antecedent to both groups, were good souls like James Agee, Robert Warshow, and Otis Ferguson (all three of whom died prematurely, perhaps to the enhancement of their already deserved reputations).

Of the egghead critics, Kauffmann was the least dogmatic and the least elitist, though he was accused by his detractors of being too “distant,” “professorial,” or “dispassionate”—too impersonal in his reviews, according to the crusading Kael, to make others want to see the movies he liked. (Would an “impersonal” critic have forgiven many sins in otherwise negligible films, as Kauffmann often did, as long as they had a progressive social message?) Nonetheless, for over fifty years, Stanley Kauffmann wrote about film in the *New Republic* and elsewhere. And since 1967, he had also been teaching film as well as theater and critical writing at the Yale School of Drama, Hunter College, the City University of New York Graduate Center, and beyond. Kauffmann’s own critical style is civilized and easygoing, not chattily egocentric like Kael’s, coltishly soul-baring like Sarris’s, or Olympianly ironic like Macdonald’s. He was a man at home in film history, conversant with culture and the

arts generally, informative without being preachy, using his writing to think about his subject and pleased to take us into his confidence.

The internal consistency of Kauffmann's evaluations makes clear that he says what he thinks, though his insights are neither gratuitously shocking nor necessarily innovative, and he does not make a show of himself or battle insistently on behalf of his own reputation. Here, then, was a critic who took films more seriously than he took himself. His stance was anything but a commonplace one among his fellow critics. Indeed, much film criticism still seems to be written by persons who love nothing more than their own persona, or know no other art form. As Kauffmann himself put the matter in a 1965 essay on Pauline Kael in *Harper's Magazine*, he pledged allegiance to "a view of the film as a descendant of the theater and literature, certainly *sui generis* but not without ancestors or cousins, to be judged by its own unique standards, which are yet analogous to those of other arts: a view that is pluralistic, aesthetic but not anti-science, contemporary but not unhistorical, and humanistic."<sup>4</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, then, was a man of large interests, great knowledge, and supreme responsibility.

A particular value of his work was his willingness to go against critical consensus. Kauffmann was never intimidated, for example, by precious, arty analyses and endorsements of films that included the French cachet (from *Cahiers du cinéma*) among their number. Nor was he ever overawed by films that won their fame because of their "difficulty," or because they claimed to be "advanced." Just because a film was labeled *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave, and was made by Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Philippe de Broca, Agnès Varda, even Jean Cocteau or Robert Bresson, Kauffmann did not cast aside his obligations as a critic to take on the mantle of a cineaste. No matter how big or idolized the director, Kauffmann always strove to separate brouhaha from artistry.

Witness his disliking of *The Serpent's Egg* (1978) despite the fact that he was an Ingmar Bergman fan; his not hesitating to explain why *Perceval* (1978) fails even though he was otherwise an admirer of Eric Rohmer; or, in a *Salmagundi* interview from 1991 (included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*), his extended critique of the urbane realism of an otherwise overrated Woody Allen. Witness also the following comeuppances Kauffmann delivered to Luis Buñuel in *A World on Film* in a review of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955): "He is a master technician with the outlook of a collegiate idealist who has just discovered venality and lust." . . . "Buñuel, the swami of sadism, has now reached the point of self-parody." . . . "Buñuel remains, for me, a highly resourceful technician and a highly neurotic adolescent."<sup>5</sup> Buñuel may have been too old and too far-gone for change by this time (1966), but these harsh words surely gave some "Buñuel-can-do-no-wrong" devotees a prod toward reevaluating their master.

All the pieces on Buñuel in *A World on Film* are grouped together, which is not as trivial an editorial choice as it may sound. Rather, it is symptomatic of Kauffmann's longtime concern with continuity—one that continued up to his last book, *Ten Great Films* (2012). When, in *Before My Eyes* (1980), you read his review of *Family Plot* (1976), you also register the important point that, for all the encomia about Alfred Hitchcock's style, a Hitchcock film has always stood or stumbled by virtue of its script. An extended essay in the same volume on *8½* (1963) discusses not just that film but also its relation to Federico Fellini's life and its place in the cinematic pantheon as well as the artistic pantheon generally. Writing on the much-awarded *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978), Kauffmann once again swims against the critical tide by asserting that it is far from top-drawer Ermanno Olmi, and proceeds to

explain why by citing much earlier, better films by this director like *Il Posto* (1961) and *The Fiancés* (1963).

No qualifications of such value judgments on Stanley Kauffmann's part are necessary because, in unabashedly, rigorously, thoughtfully, and humanely deploying those principles of value and judgment, he always reached conclusions that were conditional. Responding, for instance, to Susan Sontag's contention, in her famous essay on Godard (from the 1969 book *Styles of Radical Will*), that "just as no absolute, immanent standards can be discovered for determining the composition, duration, and placement of a shot, there can be no truly sound reason for excluding anything from a film,"<sup>6</sup> Kauffmann wrote the following in *Figures of Light* (1971):

This seemingly staggering statement is only the extreme extension of a thesis that any enlightened person would support: there are no absolutes in art. The Godardians take this to mean (like Ivan Karamazov) that therefore everything is permissible. Others of us take it to mean that therefore standards have to be empirically searched out and continually readjusted, to distinguish art from autism; that, just as responsive morals have to be found without a divine authority if humanity is to survive, so responsive aesthetics have to be found without canonical standards if art is to survive.<sup>7</sup>

Some, in reading Kauffmann's conflation of aesthetic and moral standards above, may choose to see the finger-wagging or millennial doomsaying of a self-appointed cultural gatekeeper. Yet such a conflation is not just an essential tenet for anyone engaged in criticism: it is in addition a sign of the genuine ardor, and the true seriousness (shorn of any sweater-vest insinuations), that Stanley Kauffmann brought to bear in his own writing.

As should anyone who is deeply serious about art, Kauffmann took failings in it as they should be taken: that is, personally. "Fine artists make us feel proprietary about them," he wrote in *Before My Eyes*, apropos of Antonioni's 1975 film *The Passenger*: "They invade us so strongly, become so much a part of the way we look outward and inward, that we can't approach new works of theirs without a sense that we are intimately involved."<sup>8</sup> Kauffmann's aesthetic high-mindedness was of the healthiest variety imaginable, born neither of easy cynicism nor of unthinking adherence to traditional (i.e., fabricated) canonical standards—whose existence, in any salutarily tangible sense, he dismissed as casually as the Almighty's. Such high-minded thinking was premised on a profound disdain of glibness, of posturing, of pretense and laziness and arbitrariness, qualities that are disagreeable enough in other spheres of existence but positively despicable in (what should be) the heightened and heightening realm of art. (The divination of artistic purpose, purpose both worthy and realized, was another of Kauffmann's perennially unfashionable dedications.)

Already during his first full decade as a film critic, Kauffmann had become one of the profession's most admired writers for the directness of his spare prose. He wasted little time in getting to the point. For this reason, *A World on Film* remains one of the best of collections of his movie reviews, even if it was the first. Writing about an Irvin Kershner picture, for example, Kauffmann opened with the following sentence: "*The Luck of Ginger Coffey* [1964] . . . is the sort of work that is vastly overpraised simply because it is not phony."<sup>9</sup> The first sentence of Kauffmann's review of *L'Avventura* (1960) is itself short, simple, and resoundingly dramatic: "At last."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, compare the heart- and loin-throbbing double-entendre titles of Pauline Kael's collections of film criticism (*I Lost It at the Movies*, *Kiss Kiss Bang*

*Bang, Going Steady, Deeper into Movies, When the Lights Go Down, Taking It All In*) with the sober, scrutinizing, ocular-based metaphors of Kauffmann's: *Figures of Light, Living Images, Before My Eyes, Field of View, Distinguishing Features*, and finally, simply, *Regarding Film*.)

Apart from the economy of his writing style, breadth of range is another Kauffmann virtue, abundantly on display in *Before My Eyes*. What other critic would begin a review of Robert Altman's *A Wedding* (1978), as Kauffmann does in this book, by relating the film to latter-day European naturalism; in another piece, compare Bergman to Eugene O'Neill; or, in another review, detail the ways in which young German filmmakers of the 1970s utilized American popular culture? Who other than Kauffmann would lay out Lina Wertmüller's options for portraying the Holocaust in *Seven Beauties* (1976) . . . and then explain why she decided on comedy; or indicate his perceptiveness of the pleasures, and occasional profundities, of pop by calling *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) not simply the best science-fiction movie ever made but "an event in the history of faith"<sup>11</sup>? Who else among the critics would notice—as Kauffmann does in *Regarding Film*—in Warren Beatty's *Bulworth* (1998) an unacknowledged debt not only to Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1941) but also to a Finnish film and a Ukrainian one; reveal his astute appreciation of the old Hollywood masters by arguing that to place John Ford "among the great directors of the world, as we must, is to see that the 'pure force of genius' is relatively stronger in Ford than in Dickens because Ford had much less freedom of choice and much less control over the finished form of his work"<sup>12</sup>; or discuss, during a single conversation (with Studs Terkel in 1985, included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*) about the theater, the subjects of Harold Pinter and acting, Samuel Beckett and Bert Lahr, and Bertolt Brecht and Berlin?

From the perspective of his more than five decades as a critic, nearly four decades as a teacher, and a number of years in-between as an editor, dramatist, and fiction-writer, Stanley Kauffmann clearly continued to see films in a broad cultural and historical context that eludes the tunnel-vision reviewers whose only reference points are Hollywood, old movies, and the box office. He was particularly sensitive to the parasitic relationship that middlebrow movies too often have with genuine art. "He's the film equivalent of the advertising-agency art director who haunts the galleries to keep his eye fresh," Kauffmann wrote of Robert Altman in *Before My Eyes*. "The future may judge our age culturally by its high estimate of Altman. Indeed, the nonsense about him is already coming undone."<sup>13</sup>

Reviewing Kauffmann's *Living Images* (1975) a number of years ago, one reviewer suggested that his most salient quality as a critic was that of "raffish dignity."<sup>14</sup> His raffishness was more wry than pronounced, however, as in the following humorous comment about George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), from *A World on Film*: "Sometimes I am more relieved than at other times that I am not a Christian; these occasions include the experience of most films about Jesus."<sup>15</sup> Kauffmann's raffishness remained as lively as ever, as in the following understatedly but effectively witty comment about *Fargo* (1996), from *Regarding Film* (2001): "The hot news about Joel and Ethan Coen is that they have made a tolerable film."<sup>16</sup> Or, from the same collection, these slicing words about *Touch of Evil*: "[Charlton] Heston's attempts to be a dashing young man were painful even when he was young."<sup>17</sup> Often Kauffmann's opening lines are as amusingly provocative as Pauline Kael's. Witness the following three from *Before My Eyes*: "When François Truffaut has an idea, he makes a film. And sometimes when he doesn't have an idea, he makes a film anyway."<sup>18</sup> . . . "Paddy Chayefsky is the kind of writer who is not an



obvious escape-monger or fabricator but a venturer who takes his audience on an interesting tour of anguish and then delivers everyone safely right back to his front door.”<sup>19</sup> . . . “One way to pass the time while watching a turkey with big people in it is to wonder why they agreed to do it.”<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes, however, Kauffmann’s amusing provocativeness or dignified raffishness turns to harsh dismissal. This may be the result of an impatience with stars or directors who keep flourishing despite his low opinion of them, but, from the mid-1970s on, Kauffmann seemed less willing to be gentlemanly. Thus, in *Before My Eyes*, he saw his bugbear Robert Altman as “a walking death sentence on the prospects of American film” and a “public embarrassment,” the director’s *Quintet* (1979) “paralyzingly stupid.”<sup>21</sup> *Shampoo* (1975) struck Kauffmann in the same volume as “disgusting,”<sup>22</sup> while Liza Minnelli in *New York, New York* (1977) resembled a “giant rodent en route to a costume ball.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps for a critic so concerned with film’s relationship to larger culture, the many opportunities lost, bungled, or cheapened had come to seem unbearable after years of reviewing.

Even so, as early as 1959, Kauffmann was able to toss off this line in dismissal of Gregory Peck: “He embodies Gordon Craig’s ideal of an actor: an *Übermarionette*, wooden to the core.”<sup>24</sup> Only two years later—in the same collection of criticism—he had this to say about the performance of Jackie Gleason in *The Hustler*: “It is the best use of a manikin by a director since Elia Kazan photographed Burl Ives as Big Daddy”<sup>25</sup> in 1958’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. And, in 1963, in an interview published by the magazine *Seventh Art*, Kauffmann dismissed *la politique des auteurs*, or the *auteur* theory of film (which holds that the director is the primary “author” of any motion picture), with the following words: “I think it is utterly boring . . . it’s for irresponsible children. It bores me even to say as much as I’ve said.”<sup>26</sup>

Whether harsh or generous, Stanley Kauffmann was most certainly a master of the felicitous phrase and memorable characterization. So, in *Regarding Film*, he describes Emma Thompson as the “first film actress since Katharine Hepburn to make intelligence sexy”<sup>27</sup>; he finds in *Amistad* (1997) a sense of “presence in the past”<sup>28</sup> he has not experienced since Bergman’s *Virgin Spring* (1960); and he notes that Oliver Stone “in appalling measure”<sup>29</sup> succeeds in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Kauffmann is acute about a lesser but related film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which “nourishes, abets, cultural slumming [with] calculated grunginess.”<sup>30</sup> And, ever sensitive to cinematography, he writes of *Stalingrad* (1993) that “the colors don’t glamorize, they confirm,”<sup>31</sup> while in the camerawork of *Sister, My Sister* (1994) he finds “the everyday put before us as evidence of strangeness.”<sup>32</sup> In *Carrington* (1995), for its part, “appurtenances of class and of conscious bohemianism are integral to the characters themselves, not imposed as décor. Settings and story are unified.”<sup>33</sup>

As they were not, for instance, in *Barry Lyndon* (1975). At a time—the last quarter of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—when gorgeous cinematography had all but overwhelmed intelligent screenwriting, Kauffmann’s senses never overpowered his sensibility. Of *Barry Lyndon*, whose visual splendor blinded many critics to its intellectual emptiness, he wrote in *Before My Eyes*: “Stanley Kubrick began professional life as a photographer and has lately been reverting to his first career. His new film very nearly accommodates Zeno’s paradox of motion: it seems to remain in one place while actually it is moving ahead. Kubrick has produced three hours and four minutes of pictures.”<sup>34</sup> Unlike *auteurists* and other aesthetes, then, Kauffmann understood that films begin where most reviews don’t: the screenplay. And he reiterated his belief when he wrote the following in praise of *Charley Varrick* (1973) in *Living Images*: “It was directed by Don Siegel, a great

favorite of the *auteur* critics, and it proves yet again that there's nothing wrong with an *auteur* director that a good script [by Howard Rodman and Dean Riesner, as adapted from John Reese's novel *The Looters*] can't cure."<sup>35</sup>

None of the above is to say that Stanley Kauffmann was the kind of film critic who could easily be dismissed as "literary." For example, Kauffmann's ability to engage with non-narrative work that, in his eyes, thoroughly justifies its breaking of conventional cinematic modes through the validity of its artistic purpose, as well as the breadth of its intellectual and technical resources, is evidenced by his piece on Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1977), included in *Field of View* (1986). Moreover, Kauffmann reserves his greatest scorn for conventional screenwriters whose own prose never equals their literary aspirations, deftly puncturing the pretensions of, among others, James Toback (*The Gambler*, 1974) and Thomas McGuane (*The Missouri Breaks*, 1976). Kauffmann is also mercilessly attentive to the sort of detail that is usually overlooked in hyperbolic reviews. Reviewing *The Godfather, Part II* in 1975, for example, he patiently noted four gigantic plot holes before adding casually, "And, by the way, the ship on which young Vito is said to be arriving in New York from Sicily is actually leaving New York, sailing south past the Statue of Liberty."<sup>36</sup>

One of the subconscious advantages of being a critic on a "little" magazine like the *New Republic* may be that one feels sufficiently free to tout small films, or neglected art, in addition to covering major releases like the first part of *The Godfather* (1972). Kauffmann always showed this predilection for unheralded work, perhaps never more strongly than in *Before My Eyes*. There Elaine May's barely acknowledged *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) is praised as "an implicitly large film" and "an odd, biting, grinning, sideways-scuttling rodent of a picture"<sup>37</sup> that is the best film by an American woman to date. *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), to Kauffmann's eyes, is the finest film about Vietnam, far above *Coming Home* (released in the same year)—a point that he expands upon during his 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*<sup>38</sup> with reference to *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The flaws in *Go Tell the Spartans* are pointed out, to be sure, but so are the wider accomplishments. And so is the acting.

Among Kauffmann's major distinctions from other film critics was a pre-occupation with actors. Having been a stage actor himself, he was sensitive to performers while other film critics treated them tangentially, if at all—even if they were icons on the order of Cary Grant or Marilyn Monroe, who had the screen power to shape the force and nature of their films. Kauffmann was the antithesis of those critics who believed that "serious" film criticism had everything to do with theory, genre, politics, *auteurism*, or other theme-couching considerations, and very little to do with the acting leads whom they parenthetically deigned to cite. To word-shoveling spiritual rhapsodists like Pauline Kael and Parker Tyler, then, Burt Lancaster up there on the screen might as well have been Arnold Stang. Even someone normally as judicious as Vernon Young could mindlessly argue that "film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film's total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good."<sup>39</sup>

As evidence of Stanley Kauffmann's keen interest in screen acting, let's have a look at this critic on the acting of Jane Fonda—someone whose career he had watched from the beginning. He keenly locates the mediocrity of *Coming Home* as the source of Fonda's "crimped" performance: "Her performance seems crimped by the role's careful sterilization. There's nothing much more than Jane Wyman pertness at the start, to which is later added some Elissa Landi soul. I choose '30s references

because, under the '68 trappings, a perennial movie-movie is what *Coming Home* is.”<sup>40</sup> Such a comment is typical of Kauffmann’s criticism and serves as evidence, together with the following nuggets, that he was the only American film critic who had a thorough, incisive appreciation of the performance side of cinema.

From *A World on Film*, sample these remarks comparing Frank Sinatra with Marlon Brando: “The emotion displayed by Sinatra, one feels, is always Sinatra’s emotion, not the character’s. . . . If it were possible to see Sinatra in Brando’s role in *On the Waterfront* [1954], that would clarify the difference between mere simulation and creative acting.”<sup>41</sup> In praise of Brenda de Banzie’s performance in *The Entertainer* (1960), Kauffmann acerbically wrote, in the same volume, “Her drunk scene is one to which all Studio actors should be taken and held fast by the nape the neck until they have seen it a dozen times.”<sup>42</sup> And about Ralph Richardson’s performance as the faded matinee idol James Tyrone in Sidney Lumet’s film of Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1962), Kauffmann was not afraid to be stingy, even to a time-honored great, when he wrote in *A World on Film* that the actor “provides a sound performance, instead of the affected distortion that he often palms off as originality. One cannot quite believe that his face ever set feminine hearts aflutter or that he is more than occasionally Irish (when he remembers the brogue); but he drives hard and honestly for the center of this warped, grandiloquent man.”<sup>43</sup>

Nor was Kauffmann afraid to praise a performance that other reviewers had damned. In his critique of John Frankenheimer’s film version of O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (1973), from *Living Images*, he lauded the acting of Lee Marvin, whose portrayal of Hickey, many other critics felt, had let the production down—especially in comparison to Jason Robards’ legendary stage rendition of this major character. “And to crown the work there is Lee Marvin, as Hickey, the salesman-apostle,” Kauffmann wrote:

To put it simply: Marvin was born to play Hickey. He has the perfect understanding of the man and perfect equipment to deal with it. . . . Marvin understands the bumps and sags, and he lifts it all adroitly with gesture, with vaudevillian’s esprit, to present both the man who was and who is. Then comes the payoff, the great last act. Marvin is wonderful. I have seen James Barton, the first Hickey, and Jason Robards (along with others), and though they were both unforgettably good, Marvin goes past them—so powerfully that he makes the crux of the play clearer than I have ever found it before, on stage or page.<sup>44</sup>

Let us now consider Stanley Kauffmann on the creative acting of Paul Newman—a performer who appeared alongside Lee Marvin in *Pocket Money* (1972), and whose work Kauffmann had early celebrated, in *A World on Film*, in a dual review of Robert Rossen’s *The Hustler* (1961) and Martin Ritt’s *Paris Blues* (1961). The following passage comes from an interview with Kauffmann that appeared in *Film Heritage* in the fall of 1972:

Paul Newman is much more subtle than he’s given credit for being. . . . If I could take clips from *Sometimes a Great Notion* [1971] and *Pocket Money* and show them to you side by side, figuratively, I think I could demonstrate what I mean about subtlety of imagination working its way out through vocal inflection, physical attitudes, personality aura, and all the other factors that go



towards subtle delineation. Newman . . . *thinks* differently in his pictures. It's not a question of a stock company actor putting on hooknose and beard and becoming "somebody else," a man of a thousand faces or anything like that—that's easy. Newman works from a core outward, differently. And you would find, I believe, that his whole system of timing was different in *Pocket Money* from what it was in the logging picture, *Sometimes a Great Notion*.<sup>45</sup>

Lastly in the acting department, consider this analysis, from *Regarding Film*, of the two stars who have played Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1962, 1997): "James Mason is the ideal Humbert. He gives us a doomed man, conscious of it, accepting it. . . . [Jeremy] Irons in the role [gives] it his customary vestments of intelligence and sensitive reticence, but at his deepest he is no more than melancholy. Mason suggested a tragic fall."<sup>46</sup> As for the difference between a comic performer and a comic actor, Kauffmann replies in *A World on Film*: "A performer is a person who does things to make you laugh; an actor creates a character at whose actions and utterances you laugh."<sup>47</sup> To Kauffmann, Peter Ustinov and Peter Sellers were comic performers; Alec Guinness and Jack Lemmon were comic actors. Of the "comic" Lemmon, Kauffmann went on presciently to say the following—also from *A World on Film*—about his performance in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960): "Jack Lemmon is the kind of problem American films need. He is a vigorous, highly talented, and technically equipped actor with a wide emotional range. Can Hollywood supply him with material that is good enough for him?"<sup>48</sup>

Probably most important in any consideration of Stanley Kauffmann's critical virtues is that, while many of his fellow reviewers were carried away on their own waves of rhetorical bluster, or blurby hyperbole, during the last few decades of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—particularly in their indiscriminating remarks about film acting—he did not forget the real duty or responsibility of a critic. Which is to exercise his judgment in the service of art, not to try desperately to substitute rhetorical fireworks for the experience of art, or to attempt to create masterpieces by fiat rather than discover them by careful observation. To be sure, Kauffmann was not afraid to generalize from his detailed observations, though he was always careful to avoid the thesis-mongering that too often passes these days for cultural criticism.

For his part, he avoided such axe-grinding. Letting his aesthetics flow into his morality, without dichotomy, Kauffmann thus explored movies in order to search out the universality of their subject matter, the artistry of their technique, and the ethical force that makes some art objects greater than others. He wonderfully does all three in a review of that difficult yet impressive film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), where, neither blinded by its technique nor alienated by its innovation, he could lucidly and sympathetically locate its artistic impulse at the same time as he had to conclude, "After *Marienbad*, I knew more about Alain Resnais and Resnais's search for reality; but after Antonioni's *La Notte* [1961] and *L'Avventura* I knew more about myself."<sup>49</sup>

Kauffmann's description of Harry Alan Potamkin, in a thoughtful appreciation of the late Marxist critic, could equally apply to himself: "He judged film by its own criteria, certainly . . . but criteria no more lax or unbuttoned than those that any good critic would apply to any other art." Unfortunately, as Kauffmann noted in this piece from *Before My Eyes*, "The assumption, then and now, is that such an approach precludes appreciation of good popular film. Or that such an approach marks the 'literary' film critic."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this was too sour a view of the cinematic landscape in the late 1970s. But it is none too sour a view from the vantage point of 2016. If

anyone is beleaguered these days, it is critics with taste and intelligence—like the late Stanley Kauffmann—who bring to their work a *littérateur's* perspective on narrative structure and character development, who use their cultural appetite to make thematic connections between movies (the most populist art form) and literature, and who, pedagogically speaking, focus less on the sociological or political implications of a film than on the quality of its artistic expression.

Still, Kauffmann felt considerably less beleaguered than most of his fellow film critics; and, as he pointed out in his interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “The serious critic . . . who can’t enjoy what to him is an entertainment film, is lacking in full capacity for enjoying the best film, I think.”<sup>51</sup> As Kauffmann himself would have agreed, the fact that a Japanese film by Yasujiro Ozu does not run very long in America’s biggest city doesn’t prove any more about the status of the art and its audience than the fact that Athol Fugard’s drama *Boesman and Lena* (1969) didn’t break the attendance record set by *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), or that John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* (1964) did not outsell the pop poetry of Rod McKuen. It is not so much that Kauffmann was sanguine about the state of the cinema at any particular time; rather, he knew that masterpieces in any form in any age are few and far between, and that a responsible critic must exercise the same judgment in the valleys as on the peaks. In the meantime, he was hardly waiting around for the next great work of art to appear, or for an old master miraculously to regain his powers.

Indeed, Kauffmann’s powers of discernment are perhaps most evident in his writing about films that were far from being total successes; he is capable of simultaneously appreciating their virtues (often limited) and deploring their shortcomings (often considerable). “*Julia* is irresistible,” he confessed in 1977. “Tears must flow. Mine certainly did. But this is not to say that it’s really good. In fact, if it were *really* good, tears might flow less, perhaps not at all. *Julia* is first-class middlebrow beautified filmmaking.”<sup>52</sup> Or consider, from 1978, this vintage-Kauffmann criticism of Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven*:

He brought over Nestor Almendros for this film and has proved, by doing this, the last thing he wanted to prove: there is no such thing as an artist-cinematographer; there are only good cinematographers who sometimes work for artists. And when the director is weak, as Malick is here, he tends to lean more and more on the good cinematographer’s ability, and so swamps the film in pretty pictures.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, Stanley Kauffmann’s film writing creates the kind of evocative and sensitive critical world that recharges a work of art while searching out and probing its parts. He does not merely mediate between his readers and the artwork; he allows the play of his intelligence to respond to the force of that work, using language to capture the thrust of a film and test it against its own possibilities. At his best, Kauffmann responds to the cinema, in Henry James’s phrase, with “perception at the pitch of passion.”<sup>54</sup> Agreement with him matters less than recognition of his ability to summon up the memory of films enjoyed; to evoke the pleasure of, and build up appetite for, films unseen; and, on privileged occasions, to change our long-held but nonetheless obsolete critical estimates, or to make us reflect for the first time on the magic of being born at a time when the arrival of film could transform one’s life. Without the movies, writes Kauffmann in *Regarding Film*, “Josef von Sternberg might have spent his life in the lace business; Howard Hawks might have remained an engineer . . . [David] Lean might have browned out his life as a London

accountant.”<sup>55</sup> So too did Stanley Kauffmann discover film criticism, and apply himself to it, at precisely the right time.

The right time, the late 1950s and early 1960s, was also when Kauffmann became one of the first film critics to use television as a means of consistently investigating film culture, as he brought an erudite brand of criticism to the public airwaves. Stanley Kauffmann was the host of “The Art of Film” on the old WNDT-TV, based in Newark, New Jersey, from 1963 to 1967. (WNDT merged with the National Educational Television [NET] in 1970, when the Public Broadcasting Service was formed, and became PBS’s New York affiliate, WNET-TV, Channel 13.) On this program—which in 1964 won a local New York-area Emmy Award for general excellence—he conducted serious discussions regarding the techniques and artistry of filmmaking with guests who included directors and screenwriters like Michelangelo Antonioni and Harold Pinter, as well as producers and actors. Film clips were interspersed to illustrate points in a documentary-like manner, rather than being used as they mostly were in later years: as free advertising by studios trying to plug their newest releases. As much as his reviews in the *New Republic* and the books that anthologized them, “The Art of Film” thus helped to establish Kauffmann’s reputation as a critic of perception and power.

As if his television commentary and print reviewing of film were not enough, Stanley Kauffmann was even a frontline drama critic for a time, starting in the 1960s, for the *New York Times* and *Saturday Review* among other publications. (Indeed, from 1963 to 1965, he served as both the drama and film critic for the public television station in Newark, WNDT.) Though he stopped writing regular theater criticism in 1985 (but continued to write film criticism until his death in 2013), some remarks on this role of Kauffmann’s—among his others as an actor, playwright, stage manager, novelist, trade-house editor, book reviewer, and professor—are in order.

But, before discussing Kauffmann’s work as a drama critic, I want to point out the difference between criticism and reviewing where the theater is concerned. Such a distinction is snobbish, if you will, indecorous, perhaps quixotic. But it seems to me that we are never going to get out of the miasma of deceit, self-pity, and wishful thinking that emanates from the theater in this country as it does from no other medium, unless we begin to accept the distinctions that operate in actuality between actors and stars, dramas and hits, art and artisanship—and critics and reviewers.

Perhaps the greatest irony in a situation bursting with ironies is the reiterated idea that the *critics* are killing the theater. Now we all know that when theater people or members of the public refer to the “critics,” they almost always mean the New York reviewers. It is certainly true that the critics—those persons whom the dictionary describes as “skilled in judging the qualities or merits of some class of things, especially of literary or artistic work”—have long harbored murderous thoughts about the condition of our drama, but their ineffectuality as public executioners is legendary. The reviewers, by contrast, come close to being the most loyal and effective allies the commercial theater could possibly desire. (They are killing the *non-commercial* theater.) But not close enough, it would seem, for this “marriage” constitutes the case of an absolute desire encountering a relative compliance.

As a corollary of its demand for constructive criticism the theater insists on absolute loyalty, and clearly receives a very high degree of it from reviewers, who are all “theater lovers” to one or another flaming extent. And that brings us to our second irony. For “loyalty in a critic,” George Bernard Shaw wrote in *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, “is corruption” (Vol. 3, 177). This richly disturbing remark comes near the

heart of so much that is wrong in the relationship between the stage and those who write about it from seats of power or places of romantic yearning. From the true critics the theater generally gets what can only be interpreted as gross infidelity, the reason being—as Shaw and every other major observer of drama makes abundantly clear, and as our own sense of what is civilized should tell us—that the critic cannot give his loyalty to people and institutions, since he owes it to something a great deal more permanent.

He owes it, of course, to truth and dramatic art. Once he sacrifices truth to human beings or art to institutions, he is corrupt, unless, as is so frequently the case, he has never had any capacity for determining truth or any knowledge of dramatic art; for such persons, corruption is clearly too grandiose a condition. But at least some reviewers are people of ordinarily developed taste and some intellectual maturity, and it is among them that corruption—in the sense not of venality or outright malfeasance but of the abandonment of a higher to a lower good—operates continually and in the name of that very loyalty which is worn like a badge of honor.

The point about reviewers is that they exist, consciously or not, to keep Broadway functioning within stated-out grounds. They preserve it as the arena for theatrical enterprises that may neither rise above an upper limit determined by a line stretching between the imaginations of Lillian Hellman, William Inge, and Richard Rodgers, nor sink beneath a lower one marked out by the inventiveness and sense of life of Norman Krasna, Harry Kurnitz, and Garson Kanin. (These are names from Broadway's supposed Golden Age; they have changed, but nothing else has.) Whatever creeps into the spaces north or south of this Central Park of the imagination is adventitious, arbitrary, and hermetic; if it is good, if it is art, if it is *Waiting for Godot* (1953), its presence on the Street may confidently be ascribed to someone's idea of a joke that just might pay off. (Beckett's masterpiece was billed in advertisements as "the laugh riot of two continents.")

Outside the theater's hothouse, not part of its clubbiness, its opening-night ceremonies, or its cabalisms, unconsulted about the honors it awards itself every year, and owing no more devotion to it than the literary critic owes to publishers or the art critic to galleries, the serious critic of drama like Stanley Kauffmann is left free—to do what? *To judge*. "There is one and only one justification for the trade of drama criticism," George Jean Nathan wrote, "and that is to criticize drama and not merely apologize for it" (64). Shaw went further:

A critic is most certainly not in the position of a co-respondent in a divorce case: he is in no way bound to perjure himself to shield the reputation of the profession he criticizes. Far from being the instigator of its crimes and the partner of its guilty joys, he is the policeman of dramatic art; and it is his express business to denounce its delinquencies. (*The Drama Observed*, 969)

It is this idea of the critic as policeman that infuriates theater people to the limit of their anarchistic temperaments.

Go through the three volumes of Shaw's criticism, or police blotter, covering as many London seasons, and you will find that not once in any sequence of fifteen to twenty reviews was he anything but indignant at what he was called upon to see. Without pity in *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, he excoriated that theater, which sounds so much like our own, with its "dull routine of boom, bankruptcy, and boredom" (Vol. 2, 68), its performers' "eternal clamor for really artistic work and their ignominious collapse when they are taken at their word by Ibsen or anyone else"

(Vol. 2, 76), its lugubrious spectacle of the drama as it “loses its hold on life” (Vol. 3, 181). Only when, once or twice a year, something came along that actually had a hold on life did Shaw’s critiques turn enthusiastic and positive. But not “constructive”; you do not patronize or act generously toward artistic achievement—you identify it.

For if the critic is not the maker of dramatic art, he is the person most able to say what it is, and at the same time to establish the conditions under which it may flourish or at least gain a foothold. By being negative or *destructive*, if you will, toward everything else, he can help it outlast the ephemera described as “smash” and “riot” and “socko,” as “haunting,” “riveting,” and “stunning.” And he will do his championing nearly always in the teeth of the coiners of these inimitable if vacuous terms. To the handful of great journalist-critics the English-speaking stage has had—Shaw, Max Beerbohm, Nathan, and Stark Young; Eric Bentley, Richard Gilman, Robert Brustein, and finally Stanley Kauffmann—we owe most of our knowledge of the permanent drama of our time, and in most cases we owe even the opportunity to read or see it.

When, for instance, the London reviewers were doing their best to drive Ibsen back to the depraved Continent (*Ghosts*, in 1882, was “unutterably offensive,” “revoltingly suggestive and blasphemous,” “a dirty act done publicly” [cited in Archer, 209]), it was Shaw, along with William Archer, who fought brilliantly and implacably to keep open the door to a resurrected drama. Later, Nathan helped O’Neill past the roadblock of those newspapermen who characteristically admired his “power” while being terrified of his thematic and technical innovations. And, in the 1950s, the truly heroic work of Eric Bentley—both in introducing us to the most vital contemporary as well nineteenth-century European plays and in promulgating standards for a potentially mature American theater—is a monument to the critical spirit at its untiring best. When, for example, in 1959 Jack Gelber’s *The Connection* was savaged by the daily newspapers, it was salvaged through the combined support of Bentley and other magazine critics, just as, three years earlier, these intellectual critics had rehabilitated the American reputation of *Waiting for Godot* after its disastrous reception at the hands of such reviewers as Walter Kerr. (The process used to work the way, too: in 1958, Archibald MacLeish’s *J.B.* was more accurately evaluated by the weekly critics after the *New York Times* had called it “one of the most memorable works of the century” [Atkinson, A2].)

If the history of the modern theater, then, is one of mutual suspicion between the playwright and his audience—or between the playwright and his audience’s stand-in, the reviewer—the history of the postmodern theater here in America is one of quick rewards and instant media replay. In this arena, the serious writer fights not poverty and neglect but the fickleness of a culture that picks him up and discards him before he has had sufficient time to develop properly. Like any jaded culture, ours hungers not for experience but for novelty, while an army of media commentators labors ceaselessly to identify something new. In such an atmosphere, where unorthodoxy becomes a new orthodoxy and fashion the arbiter of taste, the function of the vanguard artist, sacrificing popularity for the sake of penetrating uncharted ground, is radically changed. The emblematic avant-garde figure is no longer the expatriate playwright, exiled from nation, home, and church, but rather Julie Taymor—catapulted from the lofts of the Open Theater and the Chelsea Theater Center (where she began) to the Broadway stage, where, through *The Lion King* (1997), she peddled visual emptiness and dramatic pabulum, in the guise of experimental technique, to fat cats and wide-eyed tourists at \$100 at throw.

One of the causes of this condition can be found in the peculiar relationship between the American playgoer and the American theater critic, for never before has a handful of reviewers possessed so much power and lacked so much authority. The mediocrity of newspaper, radio, and television reviewing throughout the country is nothing new—it is the inevitable result, first, of the need for haste, and, second, of choosing reviewers from the ranks of journalism (from the sports page, say, or from what used to be known as the women's department) rather than from literary or professional training grounds. What is new, and most depressing, is the scarcity of decent critics *anywhere*. It is almost as if the theater had been abandoned by men and women of intelligence and taste, only to be delivered over wholesale to the publicists, the proselytizers, and the performing seals.

Among them was Clive Barnes of the *New York Times*. It was always difficult to take seriously the judgments of a man, like Barnes, who could speak in nothing but superlatives—who, in the course of a single year, said that five or six different actors were giving the most brilliant performances of their careers, called eight or nine resident companies one of the finest in the country, announced four or five plays to be the best of this or any other season, compared a young writer who had just completed his first play with the mature Chekhov, and identified Stacy Keach as the finest American Hamlet since Barrymore, though Barnes was too young to have seen Barrymore's performance. Barnes's use of hyperbole, with its promiscuous display of the word *best*, exposed not the splendors of the theater season but rather its bankruptcy, for it suggested that his need to identify works of merit or interest had far outrun the theater's capacity to create them.

Obviously, no theater can benefit in the long run from fake approval, partly because the critic becomes discredited, partly because the spectator grows disenchanted, partly because the theater practitioner begins to lose faith in his craft. The very rare work with serious aspirations thus gets lost in the general atmosphere of praise—either because it is ignored or unappreciated, or more likely because it is acclaimed in the same way as everything else. When the inspired and the routine are treated exactly alike, the act of criticism comes to seem arbitrary and capricious; when the corrective impulse is abandoned the whole construct of standards breaks down. A serious *literary* artist can always hope for an understanding review or two in the midst of the general incomprehension, and anyway, regardless of reviews, his book continues to exist for future generations to discover. But the theater artist writes on air, and preserves his work only in the memories of those who see it. In the present critical atmosphere, even those memories are tainted. The marriage that must exist in any art form between the mind that creates and the mind that judges has for the most part dissolved in the theater, with the result that the art form itself is in danger of losing its purpose and direction.

I'm speaking only about the United States, of course. In Rome, Paris, and Berlin, critics like Stanley Kauffmann are likely to be found writing for leading newspapers, rather than being relegated to the back pages of weekly, monthly, or even quarterly intellectual magazines. Kauffmann was dismissed from the *New York Times* in 1966 after only eight months and relegated to the back pages of intellectual magazines because, in his own words,

the theater has always resisted serious criticism and tolerates it only when it is relatively powerless. A chief component of this condition is the attitude of much of its audience, who would probably be happier with a one-to four-star rating service plus a brief synopsis. The theater's view of the matter is

supported by most newspaper publishers and editors, whose standard in criticism is not quality but readability. The writer who can supply bright readable copy, and supply it quickly, is an acceptable critic.” (*New American Review*, 36)

The reasons for this journalistic development can be found in the history of American theater criticism, which has outlines that, not surprisingly, correspond to large socio-cultural movements. To wit: as American society became less dependent on the theater for diversion (with the advent of film, radio, and the automobile), as the middle class turned into the pseudo-aristocracy, as new wealth gave more people a leisure that had once been restricted to a few, including the leisure to be elegantly bored, there arose a tribe of critics whose principal qualifications were urbanity, wit, and fundamental non-commitment to the theater. In this country a chief haven for that kind of critic has been the *New Yorker*, which, from its outset as well as from its very insignia, has always had a strong streak of Anglophilia—promulgated over the years by such (unidentical) critics as Alexander Woollcott, Wolcott Gibbs, Brendan Gill, and Robert Benchley.

A quite different kind of reviewing also arose in America, out of the same root social causes. Newspaper and mass-magazine reviewing in the first half of the twentieth century was, understandably, in the hands of representatives of this new middle class, men who represented both the appetite for boredom and an equivalent appetite for cultural acquisition at a level that imposed no strain. Mr. Average Man filled the job to the average man’s satisfaction, his virtue being that he knew just as little as the common spectator, and sometimes even less. But where American cultural and intellectual life had been relatively homogeneous in the nineteenth century, it was now dividing into major and minor elements—again, for a complex of social reasons.

One of the minority elements found its critical voice around the turn of the century, approximately, with the “arrival” of James Gibbon Huneker and the now-forgotten Percival Pollard. The theme of this “adversary” criticism was that American culture was provincial, puritanical, and benighted, and that mass-media criticism was banal when not together dumb. Huneker, who criticized several arts, developed these ideas about the theater specifically, and his themes, even when unspoken, persisted through the first five decades of the century—usually in magazines of oppositional stance with theater critics like Joseph Wood Krutch as well as the aforementioned Young, Nathan, and Bentley.

This schizoid situation, between popular reviewing and intellectual criticism, altered after the Second World War, again in response to social change. Higher education became democratized, culture “exploded,” and the middle class became aesthetically radicalized—very strictly within the limits of middle-class values (themselves now somewhat circumscribed by television) but still with a lot of innocuous daring. The result is that today we live in a critical situation in which the vocabulary and stance (if not the literary style) of the mass-medium reviewer are very different from his predecessor’s and much more like those the adversary critic. The dividing line is no longer a line; only the ends of the spectrum are clearly defined. But what is forgotten in the new joy about the “improvement” of mass-circulation reviewing is, fundamentally, that the critical spectrum still exists.

Furthermore, no one collects one man’s mass-circulation theater reviews in a book, as Stanley Kauffmann collected his dramatic criticism for the educated reader. However, unlike Kauffmann’s collections of film criticism, which, among other uses, serve as guides to movies that are “revived” in theaters, on television, and in VHS or

DVD format, his collections of theater criticism have no precisely parallel use. When one of the plays discussed is revived, the new production must in some way alter it. For this very reason, collections of theater criticism like Stanley Kauffmann's have, I think, a special importance that more than compensates for their lack of "utility." In a sense, one part of the past—like the "unknown" plays of Shaw that Kauffmann has treated both in his criticism and in an interview published in *Shaw* in 1987—would not exist without them. Collections of performance criticism, then, are books of *witness*. Surely, like other critics, performance critics can help to illuminate works, can test, revise, and extend criteria, can capture qualities and pose questions (if not posit answers). But the unique reward of performance criticism is in its immediacy and the distillation of that immediacy, in the salvaging of pertinences.

Those pertinences, for Kauffmann, always included acting (as well as directing and design), just as they did in his film criticism. But the pertinences also included the play as a piece of literature; and, in his combining of telling performance criticism with keen dramatic evaluation, Kauffmann had to know he was emulating his acknowledged hero, George Bernard Shaw. As Kauffmann himself wrote of the arrival of Shaw the critic, in an essay in *Yale/Theatre* later adapted for inclusion in his first collection of theater criticism, *Persons of the Drama*:

Through the nineteenth century, English-language criticism concentrated on acting and was often good on the subject; it was weak on new scripts. This fitted a theater that was strong on acting, particularly of old plays, and whose new plays were patterned to a pietistic society. There was bound to be a change because of changes in social attitudes, literary standards, and consequent theater ambitions. The change is first importantly apparent in the criticism of George Bernard Shaw. (*Y/T*, 11)

Only a few theater critics are worth reading; still fewer are worth reading twice. That Stanley Kauffmann, along with Shaw, belongs in the second group is evidenced in *Theater Criticisms* (his second such collection) by some eighty reviews and a handful of essays spanning the seasons between *Travesties* (1975) and *'night, Mother* (1983). As it happens, these two plays, as plays, were deliriously received by most critics, while Kauffmann had grave reservations about their dramatic art. He had grave reservations about many of the productions, playwrights, and performers applauded by his colleagues. But Kauffmann was no mere naysayer. He had reasons for his nays; he presented them with clarity; and he tried to create a critical environment in which good things in the theater could get recognized at the expense of what was bad. Discussing *Travesties*, for example, he showed how its playwright, Tom Stoppard, "plunges into promising situations and then breaks their promises, too short-winded to fulfill them artistically and intellectually" (14). Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, he wrote, is "a stunt" (174), and his analysis of the play's plot and characters leads inescapably to his conclusion that "if the play were true—to Norman's characters as she wants us to think of them—it wouldn't exist" (176).

Stanley Kauffmann's value as a drama critic resides in his values as a critic generally. For him, the drama should be something other than a repetitive theatrical game designed to comfort the bourgeoisie; it must be an art that renews itself as serious playwrights in every age reinvent their chosen form. Kauffmann admired all such writers, who know that art is not a complement to life but an increment; that drama is not psychology, sociology, philosophy, or political theory; and that the only new content is new form. He was thus always attentive, in his articles and reviews, to



the manner in which plays are made, but he was never concerned with form as embroidery or decoration. Instead, dramatic forms for him were forms of new knowledge, a mutual freeing of the self—the audience's as well as the author's—from artistic and cultural conventions that limit our sense of possibility.

Kauffmann's chief interest was always in discovering how new ways of presenting drama and unfolding consciousness aid in revealing character, transmitting ideas, and in general increasing the potential for capturing a sense of "felt life" on stage. Like Eric Bentley, he wisely saw the playwright as thinker—a shaper of modern consciousness—and as showman. The best playwrights, Kauffmann regularly suggests in *Persons of the Drama*, *Theater Criticisms*, and *About the Theater*, are the ones who can turn ideas and problems, moral conundrums and philosophical complexities, into engaging theater. Yet even these fine dramatists, with the exception of Shakespeare, have never held the kind of central position in educated minds that the authors of fiction and poetry have. This must have something to do with the relative difficulty of seeing good performances of great plays, with the trouble most readers have in imagining how a dramatic text would sound and look on the stage (if not in their mind's eye), with (for English-speaking readers) a mistrust of translations that have often well deserved the mistrust they engender. And, I suppose, there is a larger suspicion that drama is an impure medium: commercially exploitable, subject to the vanity or stupidity of actors, unlikely to come off in the theater at all. One goes to a play expecting disappointment, and one usually finds just that.

Despite Kauffmann's recurrent disappointment with the productions he saw over the years, his collected theater reviews have a genuine charm that comes, paradoxically, from their suggestion that the author did not entirely believe his own doomsday judgment on American theater and drama. So much so that, after decades of going to the theater, he still expected excellence (as in an intermittent review of the kind he published in the May 2002 issue of *Performing Arts Journal*: on the Roundabout production of Shaw's *Major Barbara* [1905]), and he was brilliant at explaining why he had or had not found it. That he stopped writing regular theater criticism in 1985, while he continued as a film critic, deserves some comment, however. For theater criticism once attracted a number of writers of the caliber of Stanley Kauffmann: not only the aforementioned Bentley, Brustein, and Gilman, but also Susan Sontag, Mary McCarthy, Kenneth Tynan, John Simon—writers, in short, who could be expected to analyze a play or production intelligently, and to correct the misjudgments of the daily press. Today, this kind of corrective has practically disappeared, as the dissenting critics have departed, retired, or shifted to other fields like music. Most intellectual journals, on their side, have long since stopped carrying theater chronicles.

Moreover, John Simon's own virtually single-handed crusade, in *New York* magazine, to preserve high standards became vitiated by his uncontrolled savagery, his excessively punning style, his peculiar prejudices, his personal attacks on the physical appearance of actors, his obsessive campaign against real or imagined homosexuality on the stage, and, lastly, his turning of his critical fury into its own mode of performance for the amusement of television talk-show audiences eager to see the bad guy in person. Simon's "progress" (which finally ended in 2005, though he, too, continued to write film criticism—for the *National Review*) may suggest why so many other serious authors, like Stanley Kauffmann, have abandoned the writing of all but occasional theater criticism, for it shows what may happen to a person of intelligence and discrimination when he observes too long the execrable products of

the American theatrical scene (unmitigated, as in the case of film, by international imports in sufficient number and quality).

After all, it was Max Beerbohm, a similarly high-minded critic, who wrote the following words back in 1904—partly in indictment of himself:

A critic who wants the drama to be infinitely better than it is can hardly avoid the pitfall of supposing it to be rather worse than it is. Finding that it rises nowhere near to his standards, he imagines that it must be in a state of motionless prostration in the nethermost depths. (110)

To counteract this tendency in himself, Beerbohm (like Shaw), when faced with an evening of despicable entertainment, went home and devised a substitute entertainment of his own, loosely disguised as a review. See in Beerbohm's *Around Theatres* (1930), for example, the little theatrical event this critic stages as his lead into a review of Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas* (1838) in dismal English translation. Stanley Kauffmann himself, it is true, lacks such playfulness—some would say triviality—but that may be because the American theater itself is almost wholly one of play, of child's play, even when it is ostensibly trying to be serious. And such a theater at one time required, I think, the stern but stimulating contempt, the acerbic yet arousing intolerance, of a Stanley Kauffmann.

Initially backing up Kauffmann in his ire were the seminal essays of Francis Fergusson as well as Eric Bentley, comprising the academic artillery being fired (chiefly from Columbia) at the philistines in Sardi's and Shubert Alley, the entrenched establishment of Lincoln Center and the Actors' Studio, and at the new breed of barbarians storming south of 14<sup>th</sup> Street past the Living Theater and toward other assorted dead ends. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that not only Bentley but also Fergusson, and later Robert Brustein and Stanley Kauffmann (themselves having moved, like Bentley, to the academy—in their case Yale—in the 1960s), represented an authentic revolution in the modern theater away from the championing of realism of the poetic as well as prosaic variety, toward an appreciation of a still (at the time) undetermined fusion of the ironic and the absurd. With tragedy in tatters and comedy in confusion, these modern critics turned to irony as the only link between the form or formality of theater and the flux of history. Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett are neither tragedians nor comedians but ironists, and a genuinely ironic sensibility is something unheard of on Broadway. Hence, even on the infrequent occasions of revivals of Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett, the ironies of their plays are swallowed up by the slobbering sentimentality of a realistic stage tradition; and it took an "ironic" critic like Kauffmann or Brustein to point this out.

In this constantly contentious period of cultural history, Fergusson functioned as a remote Hegelian influence on the revolutionaries, Bentley played Marx as he translated Brecht, and Brustein was Lenin arriving at the Finland Station on the New Haven Railroad (which would eventually take him from Yale to Harvard). On the other side, Walter Kerr turned into the Kerensky of the revolution by betraying his academic origins to consort with the hated bourgeoisie, while the drama critics of the *Village Voice* (among them Gordon Rogoff and later Richard Gilman) became the left-wing revisionists of Off-Off Broadway. Stanley Kauffmann himself wound up playing Trotsky with a tortured ambivalence that robbed him of nothing except professional stamina (exclusively as a drama critic—apart from his eighteen years as a drama-and-film critic—only the aforementioned eight months at the *New York*

*Times*, compared with George Jean Nathan's half a century or more on the critical firing line).

With style and erudition Kauffmann treats plays or productions in *Grace Notes* such as Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. In addition there are considerations here of films by *auteurist* directors like Milos Forman, Claude Chabrol, Jan Troell, Ermanno Olmi, Paul Schrader, Volker Schlöndorff, Peter Greenaway, and Agnieszka Holland. Included in *Grace Notes*, as well, are a number of pieces by Kauffmann on such subjects as repertory theater, regional theater, Herbert Blau, Harley Granville-Barker, musicals, and the idea of a national theater, together with reviews of books about Bernard Shaw, David O. Selznick, Enrico Caruso, Marc Blitzstein, and Bernard Herrmann. From the point of view of his years as a novelist and book-publisher's editor, moreover—and also his desire not to be pigeonholed as “just” a film or theater critic (though that is the work for which he is best-known)—Kauffmann discusses works of fiction by the following authors in *Grace Notes*: Ernest Hemingway, Joyce Carol Oates, E. L. Doctorow, James Baldwin, and Doris Lessing, among others.

These essays, articles, and reviews were selected from the period 1959-2007 of Kauffmann's career on the basis of their subjects' international as well as national (American) representativeness, and with the idea in mind of creating a balance between prominent works and those less prominent, or which came relatively early in their creators' careers. The precision, wit, and wisdom of Kauffmann's writing chime in *Grace Notes*, as, once again, he reveals his sense of cultural mission—and love of all the arts—by applying to literature, theater, film, and other arts the very highest of high standards.

In *Grace Notes*, as in his previous collections, Stanley Kauffmann regularly comments on the revolution—or crisis—of criticism, as he does on such subjects as the function of criticism, the qualifications of a critic, the influence or power of critics, newspaper reviewing versus magazine criticism versus academic scholarship, critical theory as opposed to critical practice, and the criticism of the New York “school.” Other topics routinely touched on in this new book include the relationship between theater and film, particularly the difference between stage and screen acting and the combining of both in the careers of performers such as Laurence Olivier and Al Pacino; Shaw, criticism, and theater (a kind of leitmotif that weaves its way through much of Kauffmann's writing); various national theaters along with the best works to come out of them; the phenomena of theater festivals and radio plays (and their nearest relative, audio recordings of drama); Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, and regional theater in the United States; children and the cinema and the phenomenon of child actors; the relationship between novels and the movies made from them; Shakespeare and the cinema; sex and sexuality as well as realism, taste, and violence in film; the pleasures, and treasures, of documentary film; various national cinemas other than the American one; the extent to which cinema seems embedded in French culture more than in any other; the phenomenon of film festivals; the persistence of American independent filmmakers in the face of the commercial behemoth of Hollywood; the ostensible “death of film” in the age of digital cinema; the “death” of the novel; American versus European fiction; and the issue of government subsidy for the arts in general.

Let me conclude by mentioning a long, lovely piece that Stanley Kauffmann wrote in tribute to (the still-living) John Gielgud in 1977 (and included in *Before My Eyes*), in which he took issue with Brecht's admonition in his play *Life of Galileo*

(1938-47) that “Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.”<sup>56</sup> “Unknown is the land that needs no hero. Unknown is the interior land that needs no hero,” Kauffmann retorts:

Brecht’s line becomes even more doubtful when we see that what we have chiefly left to cheer us, in the whirl and disorder of our days, are some heroes, heroines: not mouthers of ideals but practitioners of excellence, men and women who have made personal worlds in which the centers hold. They help us. And excellence that gives us a model, however distantly analogous to our lives, is a testament of possibility. Art is still one locus of such excellence, whichever art it is that speaks to you most directly.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the exquisite, carefully chosen phrasing whose ease belies its exceedingly precise construction, beyond the unerring sense of rhythm and cadence that punctuates a luxuriously unspooling flow of words, concepts, and imagery with short, sharp, functional little phrases (“They help us”), there is also in the above passage something fundamental to Kauffmann’s writing as a whole—and something that went largely unremarked upon in the many respectful tributes to the longtime *New Republic* critic upon his death in October 2013 at the age of ninety-seven. That something, simply put, is drama: in the sweeping sense of scale that cannot be concealed behind the cool judiciousness of the prose, and in the utterly serious conviction that art, in its many and variegated forms, is playing for the highest stakes imaginable. Hence Kauffmann’s critical writing is not only evaluation (though it is that, incisively), not only enthusiasm (though it is that, fervently); it is engagement, of a rare (not rarefied) variety: of a writer who has refined his craft, sharpened his perceptions, and through them broadened his range of response and feeling in celebrating an artist, Gielgud, whose work validates what he knows the medium to be capable of but so seldom achieves.

“Thus my account of debt, or a sketch of it,” Kauffmann ends his encomium to John Gielgud. “There a vision of a theater, of a film, better than has been available to him most of his career, thus a vision of is rigor in his life (says his acting), there is—consciously or not—the world better than the one he lives in. And thus, implicitly, he performs the fundamental function of art: to criticize life.”<sup>58</sup> If the role of art is to criticize life, then Stanley Kauffmann ceaselessly demonstrated that criticism can be a way, for those to whom it speaks most directly, to live a life in art.

In sum, Stanley Kauffmann was, and is, the critic many of us aspire to be, as well as the champion of criticism in two art forms—theater and film—more hostile to it than any other. Particularly impressive is the extent to which his criticism reveals not only an application to works of art of the highest standards, but a love of good art in any form—theatrical, cinematic, or literary. Speaking to this love, I would like to close with these words, written by Lionel Trilling about a great artist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, but equally applicable to Stanley Kauffmann, the *critic* as artist: “We feel of him, as we cannot feel of all moralists, that he did not attach himself to the good because this attachment would sanction his fierceness toward the bad—his first impulse was to love the good” (245).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wolcott Gibbs, *More in Sorrow* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), 268.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, *A World on Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York:

- Harper & Row, 1966), 415.
- <sup>3</sup>Bert Cardullo, ed., *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 168.
- <sup>4</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, "Focus on Film Criticism: *I Lost It at the Movies*, by Pauline Kael," *Harper's Magazine* 230 (June 1965): 114.
- <sup>5</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 352.
- <sup>6</sup>Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell, 1969), 176.
- <sup>7</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 110-111.
- <sup>8</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 121.
- <sup>9</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 128.
- <sup>10</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 299.
- <sup>11</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 155.
- <sup>12</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, *Distinguishing Features: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 224.
- <sup>13</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
- <sup>14</sup>Stephen R. Lawson, "Book Review of *Living Images*," *Theater* 6.3 (Spring 1975): 73.
- <sup>15</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 28.
- <sup>16</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, *Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 83.
- <sup>17</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 172.
- <sup>18</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 189.
- <sup>19</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 101.
- <sup>20</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 207.
- <sup>21</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
- <sup>22</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 116.
- <sup>23</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 203.
- <sup>24</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 11.
- <sup>25</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 58.
- <sup>26</sup>Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 3.
- <sup>27</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 11.
- <sup>28</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 31.
- <sup>29</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 48.
- <sup>30</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 61.
- <sup>31</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 73.
- <sup>32</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 75.
- <sup>33</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 78.
- <sup>34</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 180.
- <sup>35</sup>Stanley Kauffmann, *Living Images: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 241.
- <sup>36</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 106.
- <sup>37</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 272.
- <sup>38</sup>Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 182-183.
- <sup>39</sup>Edward Murray, *Nine American Film Critics* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), 199.
- <sup>40</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 120.
- <sup>41</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 48.

- <sup>42</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 185.
- <sup>43</sup> Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 75-76.
- <sup>44</sup>Kauffmann, *Living Images*, 240.
- <sup>45</sup>Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 42-43.
- <sup>46</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 124.
- <sup>47</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 51.
- <sup>48</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 149.
- <sup>49</sup>Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 249.
- <sup>50</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 376-377.
- <sup>51</sup>Cardullo, *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*, 163.
- <sup>52</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 294.
- <sup>53</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 322.
- <sup>54</sup>Henry James, "Criticism," in his *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 264.
- <sup>55</sup>Kauffmann, *Regarding Film*, 226.
- <sup>56</sup>Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. Charles Laughton (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 115.
- <sup>57</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 406.
- <sup>58</sup>Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 412.

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## Film

### ***The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, by Jacques Demy (*New Republic*, 2 January 1965)**

Love, still making the world go round, still makes the rounds of the cinema world. In France, for example, it seems that one can win the Grand Prize at the Cannes Festival by taking one of the oldest of French film love stories and pasting on a new technical gimmick—letting all the characters sing their dialogue instead of speaking it. The story of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* is the one about the boy and the girl who are too idyllic to be careful, and when he is forced to go away before they can marry (this time it's the Army), she discovers just exactly how careless she has been. Practical *Maman*, not wasting much time on shock, sets out to find a man who will be broadminded enough to marry her daughter anyway. Years later, the girl and the boy, now both married, meet briefly, to squeeze out about 12 cc. of *tristesse* before they part again forever. It all proves that no nation can manufacture synthetic national goods like the nation itself. The worst "French-type" shoddy comes from France.

The tired material might possibly have been freshened by sparkling music and direction, but Michel Legrand's score is wingless, and Jacques Demy, who made *Lola* and *Bay of the Angels*, is one of the least stimulating directors in the recent New Wave. As the girl, Catherine Deneuve has some moments of sweetness but none of distinction. The only really remarkable point is that the film won the 1964 International Catholic Cinema Award.

### ***Life at the Top*, by Ted Kotcheff (*New Republic*, 18 December 1965)**

Jet propulsion and electronic speed are clearly having an effect on much more than the rate of technological change; their accelerations are affecting the rate of social and artistic change. Is it only nine years since *Look Back in Anger*? How dated its hero and tonality seem. The latest Osborne play, *Inadmissible Evidence*, though no less blistering, is not the rage of excluded youth but of surrounded early middle age. Is it only seven years since the film of John Braine's *Room at the Top*? The newly released sequel, *Life at the Top*, reveals, from its title on, more than a change of venue and view: it is the emergence of a new British national concern.

In almost every respect, this film is as well executed as its memorable sire. But the theme has changed from power-drive via sex, à la Julien Sorel and Clyde Griffiths, to the hollowness of achieved position. Here, as in Osborne and other English writers, the theme of narcotism-by-worldliness has taken over, and doubtlessly, this, too—like many other changes in English society—will be decried as proof of Americanization.

For those readers who (as magazines used to say) missed the first chapter, Joe Lampton was a working-class Yorkshire youth who moved from his small town to a larger one, got a job in the Town Hall, had an affair with the French wife of a local snob, then deliberately seduced and luckily impregnated the daughter of the local textile tycoon. A marriage was enforced, and the Frenchwoman killed herself. Now ten years have passed. Joe and Susan have two children and an ever so comfy house. He is a sales executive in his father-in-law's firm, still at daggers drawn with the old man, accepted in social circles because of his connections but still quite conscious



both of his origins and the wide opinion that he fornicated his way to security. It is the justice, not the injustice, of this opinion that bothers him, and he is now concerned to prove his intrinsic worth. The tycoon has reached the age where he must think about business dynasty, whether to merge his company or go public, and Joe is eager to prove his merits as successor.

As for Joe's marriage, it is surprisingly tolerable. He and Susan have reached the point where disaster is possible, but this, in a sense, is because the marriage is not bad; the dangerous dissatisfaction of each is primarily with himself, with an increasing consciousness of sand slipping through the glass. Each gets an opportunity to make permanent trouble: she with a handsome local rogue, he with a TV hostess who is temporarily stationed in their town, who then returns to London, and whom Joe follows there. Both these escapades are part of a journey, for Joe and Susan, not toward complete content but toward acceptance, non-sentimentality, and greater mutual respect through greater self-honesty.

The merits of the film, which are considerable, are not in its revelations; not many adults will fail to see, shortly after it begins, what it is about and how, more or less, it will conclude. (Joe says at the last, when his wife hopes that he gets what he wants, "It's not what I want, it's what I can settle for.") But Mordecai Richler's script of Braine's book minces no words, ideas, or confrontations. Except for a tritely heroic scene in the town council chamber, it thrives on a level of candor that is not exceptional in much of modern fiction and drama but that still has the refreshment of novelty in English-language films. The construction of the screenplay is up to the level of Neil Paterson's for the first *Top* film: combining a sense of incisive forward motion with adequate dilation and exploration.

The same compliment, *vis-à-vis* the earlier direction by Jack Clayton, can be paid to Ted Kotcheff, a thirty-four-year-old TV veteran. (The only previous film of his that I know of is a 1963 number called *Tiara Tahiti*, on which Richler also worked.) There are occasional heavy touches: a newsboy hiding his dirty hands, the last shot of the factory gates enclosing Joe. There is a bed scene in which we look over the man's naked shoulder at the woman's face—a shot I sincerely hope never to see again. But Kotcheff is, in the main, imaginatively dramatic. He has a feeling for the sheer presence of human beings and has a nice eye for integrating them in their surroundings: for example, a high shot down past the huge grimy chimney of the factory to Joe's remote white Jaguar.

With the exception of Robert Morley, who is becoming a sybaritic bore, the cast is exceptionally good. Some of them are holdovers from the first *Top* picture: Laurence Harvey, who has revived both the Yorkshire accent and some ability, as Joe; Allan Cuthbertson as his snobby friend-enemy; Ambrosine Philpotts as his "county" mother-in-law; and, most particularly, Donald Wolfitt as the tycoon. Wolfitt is one of those increasingly rare actors who have powerful vitality and utter conviction, along with a subtle flavor of huge experience *as actor*, perfectly perceptible as such but which nevertheless enriches the reality of the character he is playing. It is an extra dividend that comes only from good old artists.

Four newcomers to the Braine trust are also praiseworthy. Jean Simmons plays the older Susan, and my readers may remember that I have long considered her a gravely underrated actress. (In a soapy item called *Home Before Dark* she gave the kind of dramatic portrayal for which Bette Davis is unjustifiably hailed.) Simmons presents this spoiled, well-meaning child-woman entire. Honor Blackman is crisp but sexy as the TV type; Margaret Johnston, who has perhaps the most archetypally

English face of any actress on the screen, is wanly, blondely amusing. The chief surprise is Michael Craig as her wolfing husband. I had thought of Craig as an untapped British film resource—in a strong, reserved, slightly sadistic vein. Here his moustached and gray-templed gay dog shows a new aspect of his ability and, which is equally important, reveals him as a personality, as well as an actor.

There needs no ghost come from the grave to give us the message of *Life at the Top*. But well-stated truths, however familiar, are entertaining; that is one of the irreverent facts of art. Joe and Susan Lampton's agonies are not extraordinarily deep because they themselves are not extraordinarily deep; still, their troubles are pertinent, and this account of them is interesting. This film lacks the fizz and flash of the recent *Darling*, but it is much more genuinely concerned with the morality of the new English middle class, which has at last got much of what it was striving for and wants to know "Now what?"

***Male Companion*, by Philippe de Broca (New Republic, 9 April 1966)**

Fairly high on the list of Life's Little Paradoxes is the matter of reaction to comedy. A film or play designed as a comic machine—to prod our ribs more or less incessantly—may jostle us into laughter quite often, yet leave us feeling depressed or even angry. A comic film like Philippe de Broca's *Male Companion* rarely makes us laugh, yet leaves us feeling exhilarated and—in an important, pleasurable way—sadder. De Broca, as I have said previously, is to me the most underrated French filmmaker of the day. His comedies are not designed for wisecrack or guffaw, and they have almost no satirical edge. Sometimes there is a reference to a serious theme (*The Joker*), sometimes there is parody of conventional film forms (*That Man from Rio*). But essentially his films are embodiments of a feeling that every person over thirty-five knows and that keeps puzzling him: "*I am still young inside. I have not changed inside.*"

"Not so young as we used to be," runs the tag. De Broca's films are about the youth we never were and always wanted to be: so joyous in adventure that—at the moment—such matters as social injustice and political oppression seem mere dismissible nuisances. (As they seem—at some moment or other—to everyone who has ever lived, including Mao Tse-tung.) And the sexual prodigality in these films is so innocent in its intensity that it seems pre-Adamic, without any tinge of greed, injury, or sin.

*Male Companion*, his latest work, made when he was twenty-eight, has a poor title. It suggests "gigolo," which the character is not. A better title would be *Luftmensch*. The hero simply wants to do nothing—except enjoy himself. In a film whose forebears are René Clair and Sacha Guitry, he moves from one unlikely pleasant adventure to another, always extricating himself from difficulty with the same charm that got him into the difficulty; living on or with people, usually wealthy, and paying his board with the good spirits that he evokes. His escapades take him from the countryside to Paris, to Rome, to London, back to the French countryside. It all starts with a dream; it ends with the same dream, which is fitting.

The leading role is played by Jean-Pierre Cassel, for whom, as with other de Broca roles, it was conceived. De Broca has said that, when he was still an assistant director, he went to see a play in Paris called *Oscar*. (A version of this play was done recently in New York under the title *Three Bags Full*.) When he saw the juvenile, he

said to himself, “If ever I make films of my own, I’m going to use him.” It was Jean-Paul Belmondo. A few months later de Broca went back to see the actor again, but Belmondo had been replaced—by Jean-Pierre Cassel. Again de Broca made the same promise to himself. He has, as we know, kept it with both.

Cassel is even better suited than Belmondo to this director’s films because (as de Broca has said) “grace” is what he is after in his work, and Cassel is physically and otherwise graceful. His several graces turn his sexual conquests into sexual adoptions. The girls and women seem to feel that it is By-Law Number One of the International Freemasonry of Females to protect and pamper this boyish enthusiast of sex. (The Oedipal motive is, of course, a two-way street. If the man looks in a girl for a touch of his mother, the girl is often pleased to be maternal.)

The script by Henri Lanoë, from a novel by André Couteaux, is almost satisfactory. Toward the end (the beach episode, for instance), one feels that the previously natural bubblings are being pumped a bit. The color cinematography by Raoul Coutard, although Catherine Deneuve has never looked so lovely, does not compare with that of Henri Decaë in Louis Malle’s *Viva Maria!*.

Still, the film is almost sheer pleasure. To enjoy it even more, first see *Lord Love a Duck* by George Axelrod. After that generally revolting imitation of topical satire and sexual free-flight, made by a chromium-plated but fumble-fingered merchant of the ultra-smart, then one is trebly ready for de Broca. His gifts and, especially, his spirit are priceless. For he makes escape films: not from the reality of existence but from mortality.

### ***And There Came a Man*, by Ermanno Olmi (*New Republic*, 13 April 1968)**

Ermanno Olmi is a gifted Italian director who, with *Il Posto* (poorly titled *The Sound of Trumpets* in the U.S.) and *The Fiancés*, revived neorealism at the beginning of this decade; this week we get a new film by Olmi. *And There Came a Man*, made in 1965, is now presented in the America in time for Easter.

Olmi is a devout Catholic and wanted to pay tribute to the life and death of Pope John XXIII. But he wanted to take the film out of straight religious-chromo hagiolatry. He conceived the idea of a “mediator”—a one-man chorus who addresses us, walks through the childhood and youth scenes, and, still in mufti, “stands in” for the protagonist in the adult scenes. The film was made on location, from Bergamo to Istanbul. Newsreel sequences and stills are used, and there is an opening helicopter shot of the dome of St. Peter’s that seemed to me a leftover from the prologue to *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. (That prologue was directed by Vincenzo Labella, who is Olmi’s co-author and producer on this picture.)

The aim of all these devices is warmth, to stimulate the imagination by refusing to be stolidly reportorial. Unfortunately it does not work. Partly this is because Rod Steiger, who is the mediator, is by turns doughy and airy. Partly it’s because the picture is badly dubbed—into British English. (Even Steiger’s recording of his own lines is sometimes out of sync.) Mostly it is because nothing of John’s special quality is conveyed. This could be the biography of any devout and capable cleric who rose through the ranks. Only one sequence, from a newsreel, showing the Pope’s visit to the Rome city jail soon after his election, conveys John and no one else. The very uniqueness that attracted Olmi to his subject is not in his film; and his film would not be worth discussing—would be just one more parish-hall item—if it were not by Olmi.

***Boom!*, by Joseph Losey (New Republic, 8 June 1968)**

Don't believe the ads for *Boom!*. The stars are not Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, they are Richard MacDonald and Douglas Slocombe. MacDonald is the art director, as he has been for almost all the films made in Britain by Joseph Losey, who directed *Boom!*. Slocombe, the cinematographer, also did *The Servant* for Losey. Together, with wide screen and Technicolor, MacDonald and Slocombe have turned this ridiculous Tennessee Williams script into a rococo romp. It takes place in a cliff-top villa overlooking the Sardinian sea. Thick white walls, with deep-set windows; giant gold wall sculptures; sudden slashes of red in costumes and hangings; crystal candelabra and low, square furniture—all these are photographed in hard bright sun and almost edible shadows, to create a kind of *Harper's Bazaar* metaphysics. This is the Hell of wealth with nothing to do but be tasteful.

Williams' screenplay is a hollow pomposity derived from his much-revised stage play *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, which originally was a short story. May we hope that this material has now reached the end of the line? "Boom" is the word that the hero keeps muttering as another second of life passes, to certify that he is still alive—which indicates the poetic level in concept and language. An immensely rich, equally vulgar American widow is dying (of tuberculosis, I assume), and like most Williams bitches, she is not just a man-eater, she is Really Lonely. A wandering poet, who lives on rich ladies, house-crashes, and, after refusing to sleep with the fading nympho, helps to ease her through the pearly gates. His name is Christopher, hers is Goforth, and there is a religious parable in it all if the viewer is sufficiently trivial.

As the ailing tyrant, Taylor, in some striking Tiziani outfits, is busty and boring. As the poet, Burton is long-haired and boring. Their Movie-Star vaudeville team has become one of the great camps of our time. Williams has made a couple of queer changes in the play. Taylor is younger than the actresses who played her role in the theater, yet she has been made the widow of six men, rather than the original four. The Witch of Capri, a society cadaver, has had her sex changed, or at least her body transvested, so that the part could be played by Noël Coward, who seems determined to end his career by making a public fool of himself.

Losey has directed with scrupulous attention to drops of blood on absorbent cotton and assorted grotesquerie. Apparently he is ambitious to become another Buñuel. My view of this aim is doubtless blinkered since I am not enamored of the original Buñuel; still, Losey seems to be going about it in a generally synthetic way. Well, at least he has the wit to cling to MacDonald and to get Slocombe when he can.

***Capricious Summer*, by Jiri Menzel (New Republic, 5 October 1968)**

Jiri Menzel's first film, *Closely Watched Trains*, was so delicately conceived that it's hard to believe that *Capricious Summer* is his second film. In every way, the second is inferior to the first. The color cinematography (*Trains* was in black and white) looks like bad color TV much of the time. The acting is all in "received" terms—that is, each actor depends on the audience to recognize his role from a lot of previous pictures, and he supplies only stereotyped signals to confirm the lineage. The story is like a second-rate self-consciously French film of the 1930s: a little "human" incident in a country town, doused with comfy worldly irony.

Three middle-aged male friends live in this town. A small traveling circus comes through, and each of the men almost has an affair with the one girl in the circus. Each of the men fails in his own way, while the fat wife of one of them does have an affair with the girl's funambulist-lover (played by Menzel). The pattern is plain quite early, the progress is clumsy, and the gratifications are nil. *Closely Watched Trains* was impressive because of its fresh, tart, personal look at much-used material (Nazi occupation, questions of human freedom). *Capricious Summer* is tired: a collection of clichés about European small-town café wisdom.

***Report on the Party and the Guests*, by Jan Nemec (*New Republic*, 5 October 1968)**

I was not much taken by Jan Nemec's first film, *Diamonds of the Night*, but it was a respectable piece of work. Two boys flee a concentration camp and, harried and hungry, are captured by a civil guard of ancient, doddering, inhuman huntsmen. The running through the woods all seemed to me just camera-dollying *ad infinitum*, not an emotional experience; the flashing flashbacks seemed patterned, not illuminating; but I relished the neorealistic footage of the obscene German-Czech ancients.

Nemec's second film, *Report on the Party and Its Guests*, proves once again that every country has to suffer the defects of its virtues. The U.S. has suffered for years from imitations of Hemingway and Faulkner; Nemec's film is painfully bad Kafka. (And the literary comparison is right: this picture smells of pen and ink.) Many of the performers are, reportedly, well-known Czech intellectuals and artists, and possibly, with various shocks of recognition, the film conveys to Czech audiences more substance than it does to us. Enough, at least, so that it was banned for a year.

The story, all figurative, all in gray skies and Bergmanesque woods, deals with seven picnickers, quite formally dressed, who are abducted by a gang of men. First, the seven are brusquely treated, then they are warmly welcomed by the gang's chief, a bearded man who looks like a composite of Ulbricht and Lenin. The chief invites them all to a huge birthday party for him, *al fresco* but formally set and served. These and subsequent events reveal different facets in the characters of the original seven, their host, and his henchmen.

Unlike in Kafka, there is very little large-scale resonance in the symbolism here, so I kept asking myself for small-scale literal translations. Does this incident represent the growth of liberalist communism? Does this quarrel represent Bohemian-Slovak antagonisms that antedate Marx? And so on. In short, the film works *against* the real point of symbolism: it makes the viewer overly factual. Part of this may be because many of the references are not in American knowledge. (Not our fault, surely. How much does Kafka suffer here?) But I think Nemec indulges in his own way in the laziness of Jiri Menzel. In *Capricious Summer*, Menzel trades on acceptance; in *Report on the Party*, Nemec trades on Art. If a film is symbolic, if it has this sort of lighting, it must be Art, it must have meaning. And there's a buried, quasi-apologetic egotism: especially if it's a symbolic *film*, it must be good because special courage is needed to make a film this way. There are symbolic novels aplenty; but to spend all that money and time on a symbolic *film*! Isn't that exceptionally admirable?

No. Not when the result is more pomp than point.

***The Firemen's Ball*, by Milos Forman (*New Republic*, 19 October 1968)**

Who says there's no God? Only a sentient, sardonic Being could have arranged it so that, at this moment in history, all three Czech features at the New York Film Festival were duds. I've already written on the first two, *Capricious Summer* and *Report on the Party and the Guests*. The third is *The Firemen's Ball* (now in release), the kind of low, slow "native" comedy that every European country has been making since film was invented but has rarely had the nerve to export. Color and a thin arty gloss do not improve what is only hokey stuff for local groundlings.

Milos Forman's previous film, *Loves of a Blonde*, was much overpraised. But at least it had some acerbity and control, quite absent from this mugged and obvious corn. In the pre-title sequence a man is working on a ladder that is steadied by someone below. The assistant gets distracted, the ladder falls, and the workman above is left hanging and calling for help. This level of comic freshness is maintained throughout.

***Tropic of Cancer*, by Joseph Strick (*New Republic*, 7 March 1970)**

The first thing we see is a fountain, spurting; the next is a bidet, spurting; and away we go on Joseph Strick's film tour of *Tropic of Cancer*. These two shots symbolize the whole picture. The world of Paris and what Henry Miller called the world of fuck are all that Strick's film is concerned with. Heaven knows (if that's the right reference) that those elements are prominent in Miller's novel. But Strick has used the same principle here that he used in his abortion of Joyce's *Ulysses*: he has picked a famous and respected novel with lots of sex in it and has been chiefly faithful to the sex. The damage in this case is much less than with *Ulysses* because Miller's novel is very much smaller than Joyce's in every sense, so there simply is less to omit, but the formula is the same: find a critically celebrated, sexy book, and under the guise of homage, exploit the sex.

Consequently, we see a parade of breasts and of female pubic hair, and we hear—often—all of Miller's four-letter words, plus one particularly vivid six-letter one ("squish"). All the material has been taken from the novel. So, too, are a few passages of non-sexual ruminative prose including the book's conclusion. But the sum is a long way from representing the novel, because Strick has left out Miller.

There is no hint in this film of the two most important elements in the book, from which everything else proceeds. First, the hero—Miller—is a writer. Strick gives us not the slightest touch of this. Second, he has come to Paris to write, as an escape from America, which he loathes. He loathes a lot about Europe, too, but Paris is freedom, America is prison, here is where he can fulfill himself as artist and man; and his sexual gallivanting is part of his declaration of artistic and environmental release, after almost forty years of slavery and constriction. All the film shows us is an amiable fellow, drifting around Paris, mooching on his friends, laying girls.

This leads to another defect. As he did with *Ulysses*, Strick has updated *Tropic of Cancer* to the present. Not credible. First, the group of American expatriates do not seem like contemporary men, in manner or thought; they have a Hemingway-Fitzgerald air to them. Second, the sexual liberation of France *vis-à-vis* the U.S. is very much less marked in 1970 than in 1930, both in life and literature. The tone of the present has a cracked ring.

Some credit does go to Strick and to the co-author of the script, Betty Botley,

because they have not tried to impose a formal story on Miller's rhapsody of flow. They have rearranged and reassigned some material, but have tried to keep a sense of ease and happenstance. And, admittedly, the film does get some humor from time to time by reason of the glandular pitch at which it operates. But when Strick gives us the nonsexual passages on the soundtrack, he resorts to obvious Terry Southernist touches, showing us shots of tanks and soldiers and parades, thus considerably straitening Miller's larger intent in his remarks about the hollowness and dissatisfaction of life. And of course Strick uses by-now platitudinous modern editing: jump-cuts *à la* Godard in the middle of sequences, plus glimpses of events past or to come.

We even get a quick look at old Henry Miller himself in one montage; the young Miller is played by Rip Torn, with some of the appealing goofiness that he showed in *Coming Apart*. (Those two pictures must now make him FilmLand's champion copulation-simulator.) But the best performance is by James Callahan as Fillmore, the American who cracks up and has to go home.

The presence of lots of girls who have lots of everything clarifies something about the novel that is even clearer in the picture. The sexual viewpoint is pure male-chauvinist; the girls are, or might as well be, faceless. To Miller, Paris is a harem, and he is a newly crowned sultan sweating to make up for lost tail. This view of woman-as-utensil is much more apparent now in these days of the female revolution, and it is underscored by Strick's lavish, impersonal display of women's liberated fronts.

### ***A Piece of Pleasure*, by Claude Chabrol (*New Republic*, 19 June 1976)**

Claude Chabrol, probably the most prolific director of consequence in the Western world, has just done a film on the subject of male chauvinism: the aptly titled *Piece of Pleasure*.

The rich womanizer is played by Paul Gégauff, who has written or collaborated on many Chabrol scripts. The woman he lives with, and has had a child by, is played by his wife, Danielle Gégauff. He is lean, gray-haired, smooth, with what look like two glass eyes; but he has the attractive voice that seems a Frenchman's birthright. She has a well-sculptured face with fine gray eyes. Neither of them is outstandingly effective, though I'd rather see her again than him. (With her clothes on.)

To the womanizer this woman is his creation, whom he has taught style and taste. She is so much his that he can wryly urge her to have affairs, as he has them. She tries it, likes it, leaves him. Quickly he finds someone else and marries her, possibly to insult the earlier woman. Then he finds out that he really needs Number One and implores her to return. When she refuses, he gets sufficiently irked at her impertinence to murder her, at the grave of their child's nanny. His silkiness has been ripped by his male ego.

This ending (script by Gégauff himself) is in the tradition of Musset's *No Trifling with Love*, where a grim finish grows out of a polished comedy and paradoxically fulfills it, rather than cracking it. Chabrol is one of the most fluent directors alive: film pours out of him like song out of a thrush, well-made even when the script is weak. *A Piece of Pleasure* is middling Chabrol, not consistently engrossing but incisive in its revelation of increasingly engorged male petulance.

Is a new ideology taking root in France? Can it be true, a blast at male egotism from the land of oo-la-la?!

***Edvard Munch*, by Peter Watkins (*New Republic*, 16 October 1976)**

*Edvard Munch* is a Norwegian film directed by an Englishman, a sort of re-created “documentary” about the formative years of the painter. It has been hailed as one of the best screen treatments of artistic creativity. All I really got out of it was the director’s efforts to be creative himself, and since he is Peter Watkins, who made such affected claptrap as *Privilege* and *Punishment Park*, the spectacle is dispiriting. True, *Edvard Munch* is better than those two, which were like Ken Russell castoffs, but it’s not as good (even) as the best Watkins work I’ve seen, his BBC film on the Battle of Culloden.

He wants to show us how Munch became the tormented painter of tormented paintings. The film opens in Christiania in 1884 when Munch was twenty-one. Almost three hours later, what with all the flashbacks and flashing sideways, we have arrived only at 1908. (Munch died in 1944.) But we are supposed to have seen what made this painter a leader of expressionism.

Watkins’ approach to his explanation is intense, God knows, and sincere, mostly. His principal technique is incessant cutting: it’s a long scene here that runs ten seconds. By this bitsy mosaic method, much of which is subliminal of the past, Watkins wants to keep before us various strands of Munch’s conscious and unconscious. (Interminable interwoven shots, for instance, of the boy Edvard coughing blood when he was in bed with tuberculosis.) The voice-over also gives us considerable social-cultural data of the years through which Munch was living, such as the fact that Volume II of *Das Kapital* was published in 1885, on the theory apparently that the world that produced these events was also affecting Munch’s art. And we get lots of shots of Munch at work, sometimes scoring a painting with the handle of his brush, sometimes painting out and starting over. And we get huge close-ups of paint coming out of tubes, of wood being gouged by a chisel.

All this febrile editing, this imposition of peripheral data, this shoving of the camera right up against things and faces, does little more than convey Watkins’ own excitement-for-sale. Why Munch, played mostly with impassivity by Geir Westby, turned out differently from or better than his contemporaries is left where it was at the start: a mystery.

Still, this film doesn’t do much worse than most artworks about artists and their creativity. I once saw a play about Wagner in which he embraced Mathilde Wesendonk, cried “I’ve got it,” strode over to the piano, and whammed out the opening bars of the “Liebestod.” That’s more or less what the rendition of creativity comes to most of the time. The one exception I think of takes place, coincidentally, in Christiania at just about this time, Knut Hamsun’s great novel *Hunger*. The film that was made of it in 1968 did much more with the subject of genius than *Edvard Munch*, but that was because of Per Oscarsson’s wonderful performance as the protagonist and the director’s reliance on that performance. I can’t imagine Watkins, busy-busy as he is, “turning over” a film to an actor.

Incidentally, the incessant use of two-shots and close-ups, the lumpy discursive structure, and the occasional fades to black suggest that *Edvard Munch* was made as a series for television and is assembled here, though I haven’t seen this matter mentioned anywhere.



***Quartet*, by James Ivory (*New Republic*, 4 November 1981)**

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a writer of clear distinction who loses it when she writes screenplays. Her script for *Roseland* (1977) was a ragout of Movieland sentimentalities; her adaptation of *The Europeans* (1979) reduced James's work from a novel to a series of wooden scaffoldings. Now her screenplay of Jean Rhys's *Quartet* comes as close to obliterating the book as is possible for an adaptation that sticks pretty much to the story and retains much of the dialogue.

All Jhabvala's screen work, as far as I know, has been done for one director-producer team, James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, which may explain the trouble. Of the team's work that I've seen, only *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) gave me much pleasure; in most of the others, the filmmaking itself has been stilted. But in *Quartet* Ivory-Merchant don't provide Jhabvala with that "excuse": it's a top-drawer cast. Ivory's direction is more secure than I can remember it, and the atmosphere—Paris of the expatriates in 1920—is vivid. It's the screenplay that unbalances Rhys. The novelist gives us the sense of a tiny, but astonishingly hardy, narcissistic bird singing the song of its troubles during a prolonged battering by life. The effect of the film is just a lot of wailing.

Most of this wailing is done by Isabelle Adjani as the presumably autobiographical heroine. She is married to a handsome Pole who turns a swindling trick ineptly. After he is jailed, she is alone and broke. She is taken into the home of a rich English couple played by Alan Bates and Maggie Smith: he is an art patron, she a painter. (The Bates role is generally believed to be a portrait of Ford Madox Ford, with *Quartet* as an account of Rhys's affair with him.) The bizarre coziness in the story is that Smith not only agrees to Adjani's presence in their home, she virtually assists her husband's affair with the guest. Apparently it's not the first time that Smith has helped her husband to acquire women; and Smith conveys that, though she is not delighted—and is not bereft of his conjugal attentions—she does it to ensure the marriage.

Out of the ménage and its consequences, very little of interest develops other than the atmospherics, already familiar to us from painting and photography and literature. (A character vaguely modeled on Hemingway hovers vaguely on the edges of the story.) Where Rhys gives us loneliness and bewilderment and desperate strength in her heroine, the film just gives us Adjani crying a lot. Bates, moustached, generally spectacled, always brusque, supplies the solipsism that equates moral values with gratification. Smith slithers through her dialogue the way she slithers in her slinky 1920s dresses, and she has the most memorable line. She and Bates and Adjani, whose character is named Marya, are sitting at a restaurant table one night, bored; and Smith suggests that they visit an amusement park. "We'll put Marya on the Joy Wheel," she says, "and watch her being banged about a bit."

*Quartet* lacks the interest of its source because of its basic failure, a familiar one: failure to understand that filming a good novel doesn't mean filming the story, it means transmutation of the entire work.

***The Flight of the Eagle*, by Jan Troell (*New Republic*, 16 May 1983)**

"Luck is not chance— / It's Toil—" wrote Emily Dickinson. This is false. It's so plainly false that it hardly needs to be disproved. Of course, without toil, luck can't

be exploited if it happens to come; but you can toil away all your life and never have any real luck. Ask millions.

Luck can play particular hell with artists, particularly hellish because it has nothing at all to do with talent. Mode of presentation, current critical atmosphere and competence, moment of appearance—all these can affect an artwork, whatever its merits, thereby affecting an artist's career. Worst, perhaps, is not to have the luck of good self-management, the ability to make the right choices about how to apply one's talent. Hemingway said somewhere that every artist needs not only talent but, in equal measure, the lucky gift to be able to guide it well. If the fairy godmother forgets Part II at the artist's cradle, Part I is going to suffer.

Jan Troell, the exceptionally gifted filmmaker, is suffering—from several kinds of bad luck. His first feature, a lovely work called *Here's Your Life*, was shown in the United States in a version so truncated that Troell was reportedly sickened by it, and it has never been shown here properly. His second feature, with the marvelous Per Oscarsson, has never been shown publicly in the U.S. at all, though the reviews I've read in film journals make it sound fascinating. Then Troell made two feature films in tandem, derived from an immense novel by Vilhelm Moberg—*The Emigrants* and *The New Land*. These two pictures, about a husband and wife played by Max von Sydow and Liv Ullmann, constitute the best screen treatment of one of the major events in Western history, European migration to North America. (As always, Troell collaborated on the screenplay, then directed, photographed, and edited on his own.) Excellent in almost every way, this monumental double achievement has never had anything like the recognition it deserves.

And then Troell moved into another kind of bad luck—let's call it the Hemingway curse—the unlucky management of his talent. He accepted a Hollywood job, and, patently uncomfortable with it, made an unbelievably commonplace film called *Zandy's Bride*, with Ullmann and Gene Hackman. Lately the Hemingway curse has been working more subtly, because he's still not managing his career well even though he's back at home again.

*The Flight of the Eagle* is based on fact. In 1897 a Swede named S. A. Andrée took off in a balloon from Spitzbergen in an attempt to fly over the North Pole and claim it for Sweden. He had two younger companions. (One of them was named Strindberg, a cousin of *the* Strindberg.) Balloon and crew disappeared. In 1930 the crew of a Norwegian ship discovered the remains of the three explorers, along with Andrée's diaries and some well-preserved film. (Troell uses many of the photographs that were developed from this film.) In 1967 Per Olof Sundman wrote a "documentary novel" about the Andrée expedition, and from that novel, Troell and collaborators did the screenplay. Then, as usual, Troell himself directed, photographed, and edited.

The diaries disclosed that the balloon had gone down a mere three days after takeoff; and detailed the hardships of the three men as they dragged sleds across arctic emptiness, trying to reach a place where they might be found. Apparently Sundman expanded on the diaries with some novelistic invention, which Troell has used. The deaths, however, are certain. Strindberg collapsed of fatigue and drowned in a small pool in the ice before his friends found him. The second man was savaged by a polar bear and died. Andrée, the survivor, just died. There was nothing else for him to do.

What drew Troell to this story? The immediate answers are obvious. It's a story of action and courage. For a Swede, it's a patriotic story. For a cinematographer with Troell's northern eye, the location must have been highly seductive. (One of the

most exquisite shots I've ever seen is in *Here's Your Life*, a sled slipping along over the white ground with a white sky above it.) The arduous journey is, like most arduous journeys, also a journey to the interior of the men involved. And the story is analogical: these three aerial explorers—supposedly aerial, anyway—are (relatively recent) forbears of astronauts.

But here's where the bad luck comes in. Troell presumably took the answers above as sufficient reasons to make the film. He failed to ask the most important question: what is the picture going to be about during the time it takes the three explorers to die? Approximately the first third of the film is taken up with the first aerial attempt in 1896, abandoned because of unfavorable winds; the building of a new balloon during the winter; the recruiting of the two associates; the personal affairs and farewells; the takeoff from Spitzbergen; and the collapse of the balloon three days later. But then what?

Films about trapped men, fact or fiction, trapped in submarines or on rafts or in mines or on lost patrols, all have a strong family resemblance. No matter how gifted the filmmaker or heroic the story, the films tend to move into the same curves of character revelation and dramatic dissolution. This is even more true if history ordains the ending. When circumstances grant the filmmaker a large enough cast of trapped men, we get the strong man (usually, but not always, the leader), the weakling, the cynic, the romantic, the religious fanatic, and so on. *The Flight of the Eagle* has room for only three. Max von Sydow is the staunch leader, tough as ambulatory pemmican. Sverre Anker Ousdal is nicely ambiguous as the doubter. Göran Stangertz is appealing as the young romantic who dreams and daydreams of his fiancée and writes her unsendable letters. (Troell's most desperate moments are his *Elvira Madigan* flashbacks and fantasies about the girl.)

Ideally—no pragmatically—this film ought to exist for what happens after the balloon collapses. Yet this is exactly when *The Flight of the Eagle* begins to pall: because comparable films, whether fiction or not, have taken us through the same basic story so often that we can look only for variation, not for differences. And there isn't sufficient variation. I forced myself to hope that Troell had a theme up his sleeve, some idea of pertinence and depth that he would dramatize through the devolution of these three lives. But all we get is what we see and foresee. Troell tries to compensate with other elements. (Perhaps he didn't think of them as compensation. Perhaps they were his purpose—which makes his self-management even more unlucky.) He does make us appreciate the size of the space, he does chill our bones with the cold, he does make us respect these three men. But—oh, vulgar inescapable comment—the film drags.

Fates! Attend! A greatly gifted man has endured enough bad luck at your hands, in self-management and in other ways. It's time to lay off him with troubles and lay on with some triumphs. A break for Troell, Fates. Please.

### ***Iceman*, by Fred Schepisi (*New Republic*, 14 May 1984)**

Cold is fairly hot these days. Arctic settings have never been very popular, but the past year brought two frigid films, *Flight of the Eagle* and *Never Cry Iceman*, and now we have *Antarctica* and *Iceman*. All of them have at least two elements in common: they reflect hunger for relatively novel settings and recognition of chances for spectacular cinematography.

*Antarctica* is the worst of this low-temperature lot. It's a Japanese film based

on the story of a 1958 expedition to the South Pole. Because of a sudden change in weather conditions, some sled dogs are abandoned by their masters at the polar camp. The dogs have considerable trouble in surviving; several don't make it. The masters return as soon as they can, which is many months later. I couldn't understand the joyful reunion. Why didn't the surviving dogs attack their betrayers, who had left them chained up outdoors? The picture may have appeal for children, but even children may wonder how the filmmakers knew what the abandoned dogs did (this is allegedly a factual story) and how some of them died. The cinematographer, Akira Shiizuka, supplies splendid pictures, but the more sophisticated they are, the more they contrast with the sentimental silliness of the story.

*Iceman*, an American production, is complex and portentous. The central idea of the script by Chip Proser and John Drimmer is promising. In northern Canada, amidst immense snowy expanses, an exploration crew from an American mining company discovers a form encased in ice. A huge cube is cut out of the ice formation, is flown back to the lab by helicopter, and is carefully opened. Within it is found the body of a man, clad in skins, who was quick-frozen some 40,000 years ago. Within that man is found life, cryogenically preserved. He is returned to consciousness and being.

The idea has possibilities, few of which are realized; still, it's easy to see why it appealed to the director, Fred Schepisi (pronounced Skepsee). He is the Australian whose first American film, *Barbarosa*, was the closest to a spaghetti Western that's ever been made in Texas; but his previous film, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, was a powerful and lovely work about an aborigine at the turn of the century, his betrayal and downfall at the hands of Australian whites. *Iceman* clearly provided Schepisi with another chance to contrast the primitive and the modern. The trouble here is that, unlike the Australian story where the drama was all too available, the drama in *Iceman* had to be invented; and most of that invention deals with conflicts among the scientists, not between the primitive and the civilized.

Grant to the realm of scientific fiction—as against science fiction—the gigantic, lavishly equipped laboratories buried under the snow. Waste no thought on how the construction machinery, let alone the scientific equipment, was transported to the middle of white nowhere. All this is easier to accept than that the station's research director is an attractive young woman. That idea looks more like Movieland fiction than does the huge underground lab. Lindsay Crouse is a good actress (she was Daniel's mother in *Daniel*), but she can do nothing with this role—not because it's a woman in charge of a big research team, but because it's not a woman. It's just the filmmakers' device to get an attractive female into a cast of men, to tickle us with the possibility of romance between her and the leading man. The only other women in the picture are an elderly scientist who is flown in later for special help, not clarified, and some older Inuit women who are used as mythic totems.

The leading man is an anthropologist played by Timothy Hutton (who was Daniel in *Daniel*), and it would be hard to think of a more scruffy, scraggly blob of a figure in American films today. Hutton's face and body seem to have no fixed outline; his general effect is that of a long, bearded amoeba. The battles between him and Crouse are weary reruns of disputes, full of technical lingo, that recur in films of professionals at odds which, if they are between people of differing sexes, usually end in bed. The only variation in *Iceman* is that the fights don't end horizontally; but that negative variation doesn't give the tired tussles any retrospective freshness.

The revived Iceman is kept in a vivarium, a sort of preserve as in a modern zoo, with a small waterfall, a stream, and some caves (all underground in the Arctic). The forward motion of the film, such as it is, evolves from Hutton's entry into the vivarium and his gradual, growing friendship with the Iceman, learning his small vocabulary, earning his trust. The worst scene is the one in which Hutton insists that Crouse accompany him into the vivarium. The excuse is that he wants to learn whether a different kind of creature will arouse a different response in the Iceman. Under the scientific baloney is plain sex tease, for the poor Iceman and for poor us, too. He and we are repelled.

The best element in the film, its only legitimacy, is the performance of the Iceman by John Lone. He is a dancer-actor-director-choreographer-composer, born in Hong Kong, whose work I admired in a play called *The Dance and the Railroad* and who is an artist of skill and imagination. His Iceman is no mere aggregation of grunts and gropes, comic and grave; it is a vision realized. Not many of us can check the accuracy of Lone's performance of a 40,000-year-old, but then not many of us can check the accuracy in a performance of Greek tragedy merely 2,500 years old. We are persuaded in both cases only by inner consistency; Lone provides it here. The sequence in which, depressed and lonely and hopeless, he invites Hutton to kill him is quite moving—although why he couldn't kill himself is one more of the film's unanswered questions.

Schepisi worked faithfully with Lone, tritely with the others, trickily with his film. Why are there shots from the Iceman's point of view of the fuzzy figures hovering around the operating table as he first returns to consciousness after his long sleep? Why does Schepisi permit the clichéd acting of most of the men?

The cinematographer is another Australian, Ian Baker, who has worked on all four of Schepisi's films and now is restraining his weakness for Beauty—at least some of the time here. Baker treats panoramas reticently, therefore well. A special word, too, for the sound editor, Frank Warner, and his colleagues. The soundtrack, in Dolby stereo, is unusually crisp.

But the hope raised by the film's premise is left unsatisfied. I thought that *Iceman* might be a mirror film for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a dramatic meeting with the past instead of the future, an encounter with an enlightening past simplicity instead of an encouraging future intellect. This expectation is dashed, and no other is raised. All we get is a lot of lab jabber and quarreling in the midst of which the Iceman pines and from which he finally escapes, mistaking a helicopter for a legendary bird. Nothing happens with the Iceman that is remotely worth all the cinematic trimmings. At the end, as Hutton watches the Iceman's return to his ancestors, he is left sadly comprehending. But this finish is only an escape hatch for the story, not a conclusion, made all the more vapid by the fact that little of genuine interest has happened en route. *Iceman* was a good idea taken up by filmmakers incapable of making good use of it. Schepisi has shown gifts; maybe he ought to go back home where he had more ease and authenticity.

### ***Once Upon a Time in America*, by Sergio Leone (New Republic, 2 July 1984)**

What is Robert De Niro up to? This excellent actor is said to be choosy about the scripts he accepts, yet here he is in the leading role of a monstrosity called *Once Upon a Time in America*, intended to be an epic of Jewish gangsters in America, a koshered counterpart to *The Godfather*. In itself that's not a bad idea, but this script is

so ludicrously written, so adventitiously characterized, so madly constructed that I could scarcely believe that De Niro was really present. I had the feeling throughout that this was one of those trick films where, by double exposures and matte shots, they include figures who were somewhere else at the time; and that's how they got De Niro in frame. When this picture was shown at Cannes this year, it reportedly ran over three hours and forty minutes; now it's a mere morsel of 135 minutes, but condensation is a poor excuse for this hodgepodge.

The director, Sergio Leone, is one of six scriptwriters. Perhaps they all worked serially without showing one another what they had done. Leone, said to be chief instigator of the "spaghetti Western," is not stupid, just adolescent. He makes the movies that he was seeing inside his head when he was watching American films as an Italian teenager. Visually his style is Early Jukebox. He engaged lush designers and a cinematographer who can handle lush design, Tonino Delli Colli; and for the score he got his own pocket Puccini, Ennio Morricone, to ladle out some good gooey stuff. It's all a marinara dream on a billion-dollar budget.

About the story let's say only that it starts in a fabricated New York in 1921, with streets and rooms on the lower East Side about the size of the Grand Canyon, and waddles on through some thirty-six years, while warped boys grow up to be successful hoods, good girls go straight and bad girls go jolly, a Jimmy Hoffa type ambles through, and the survivors of the original gang achieve the dignity and respect that gray-haired killers always achieve in films.

One other point: De Niro's character is named Noodles. So inevitably there comes a point when someone has to say solemnly, "I love you, Noodles." A few moments here remind us of the De Niro of *The Last Tycoon* and *Raging Bull* and *The Godfather Part II*. Too few. Why is De Niro noodling?

***Blood Simple*, by Joel & Ethan Coen (*New Republic*, 25 February 1985)**

The interviews with Joel and Ethan Coen specify that they are soft-spoken and well-educated. Apparently this is because their new film is a gory thriller, and the press doesn't want us to think that such a picture is necessarily the work of ignorant roughnecks. In fact the Coen brothers—Joel directs, Ethan produces, both are under thirty—are rather more typical of murder filmmakers than not: members of the clever university-bred generation of pop manufacturers.

*Blood Simple*, which the Coens wrote together, is one more first film that grows out of films seen, one more first film in the murder genre. This kind of beginning is quite familiar, in the U.S. and abroad, ranging in quality all the way from Godard's *Breathless* down to Bogdanovich's *Targets* and points beneath. The *film noir* attracts beginners because, as in Godard's case, it provides an immediacy with which to treat large themes or because, as in most cases, it provides a vent for stored-up adolescent movie fantasies and doesn't require much depth of human understanding. My troubles with *Blood Simple* are not because of its genre, an almost venerable mode of *début*, but because its ingenuities are strained and its plot frazzled.

Let's look at some of the plot, already well spilled in Coen interviews and in reviews. What we get first over some shots of Texas landscapes is a monologue about the speaker's dislike of complainers: complaining isn't done in Texas, we hear. As it turns out: (a) the speaker is a private eye; (b) the monologue, gnomish and portentous, has nothing to do with the story.

Then, after the credits, we see the wife of a well-heeled Texas saloon owner—Frances McDormand—running away from her husband (played by Dan Hedaya) to Houston. She is being driven through the rainy night by one of his bartenders, John Getz, who is doing it only as a favor to her. When she asks why, he says that he has always liked her. She asks him to stop the car. When they stop, they note that they are being followed by a Volkswagen Rabbit. Then, despite the fact that she has not been running away *with* Getz, despite the knowledge that they are being followed, the pair proceed to a motel.

Next morning Hedaya calls the motel and asks Getz how he enjoyed himself. And then, after the wife has given up flight from her husband because of Getz's interest in her, after the husband has revealed that he knows of the motel night, wife and lover return to the husband's house. So begins this supposedly fate-driven but clumsily carpentered story.

In the VW Rabbit is a fat private eye, M. Emmet Walsh. (Some private eye! He drives the only car of its kind in the whole picture.) He brings Hedaya photographs of the motel pair *in flagrante*. Soon after, Hedaya hires Walsh to kill the pair, who are now living in Getz's house. Walsh accepts, but we soon suspect that he has a trick in mind because he breaks into Getz's house at night and does not touch the sleeping pair; he only steals McDormand's pearl-handled revolver. (Some private eye! He parks his VW directly in front of the house he intends to enter, then goes in wearing squeaky shoes.) That revolver was planted earlier, along with the fact that it contains only three bullets.

Walsh's gimmick is to fake blood on some photographs of the sleeping lovers to prove their deaths to Hedaya. After collecting his payment, Walsh shoots Hedaya in the chest with the wife's pistol, which he leaves there. Unwittingly, he also leaves his engraved cigarette lighter. Getz then goes to Hedaya's office to collect salary due, and there he discovers the body as well as McDormand's gun. To protect her, as he thinks, Getz decides to dispose of the body. He puts the pistol into Hedaya's pocket. He tries to clean up the small sea of blood on the office floor (the single stupidest, most futile act in the film), dumps the corpse onto the back seat of his car, and drives out into the country night. He stops along the road to be sick (several sickings-up in the picture—to show sensitivity, I guess). When he gets back into the car, he finds that the corpse has crawled out onto the road.

I suppose the Coens have medical data to prove that a person who had been shot in the middle of the chest and had lost quarts of blood could still be alive and mobile; but all I could think of here was film data, previous stories in which dead people weren't really snuffed and could grab their killers' legs. Getz doesn't quite have the nerve to run over the dying man, as he first contemplates; but he does have the nerve to drive him out into a field and bury him alive. (Touches of Brian De Palma here.) While this burial is going on, the corpse ("corpse") pulls the pistol from his pocket. Getz sees the gun aimed at him and lets Hedaya pull the trigger twice. (A touch of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* here.) How did Getz know the hammer would fall twice on empty chambers? Why didn't he care? Anyway, he then takes the gun back and completes the interment although, for a time, we see Hedaya's chest heaving under the dirt.

Enough of the plot—except to add that Walsh discovers he has left his lighter in Hedaya's office, goes back to recover it, and sees that the body is gone. Because (I suppose) he thinks they have his lighter, though they don't, he tracks down the pair,

kills the man, and is himself killed by the third bullet in the gun. (The second went off in an accident.)

The sole survivor of the original four is the wife. Why? There's no cynical twist in it because she doesn't even know what really happened. The real center of the story is Walsh: he is the biter bit. With him on the relative sidelines, the story just flops along until it stops, without a conclusion. And it's Walsh who has the showiest part, hardly original but at least with more stock décor than the other three.

The cinematography of Barry Sonnenfeld is done in a palette of syrups, much less *film noir* than *film orange*. Joel Coen's much-praised camera style has three chief characteristics. First, ground-level shots, including the opening shot right down at the level of a highway surface (first time I've seen that since *Electra Glide in Blue*, 1973), followed by much rushing over lawns and floors (as in Kubrick's *The Shining*). Second, many ceiling shots, some of them through a slowly turning fan. Third, vacant-screen shots into which a face or object moves. In sum, Coen's style is an unabashed stroll down Memory Lane.

The joint Coen ingenuity soars to its apex in the last sequence. Walsh reaches around from a window in an apartment to open a window in the next apartment, and his hand is pinned to the windowsill with a knife. (The knife, too, was "planted" earlier.) How the Coens must have exulted when they thought of it. Then they capped it! With his other hand Walsh shoots a lot of holes through the plywood wall so that he can punch through the wall and pull the knife out of his pinned hand. Then they capped *that*. Walsh is shot in a bathroom and falls next to a toilet, his head under a washbasin. The pipes drip on him, slowly. That's the last shot. Talk about fearless, candid symbolism.

Well, much talk there has been. (Less talk about the ridiculously trite reappearance of the buried husband near the end, which turns out, folks, to be only a nightmare.) The press has widely celebrated *Blood Simple* as a historically important début and has, in anticipation, been defending it against censure for its gore. The real argument against it is that it's not very good of its kind, for reasons given above and because, unlike the best *films noirs*, it has no sense of the real witches chuckling high above the futile witcheries of men.

What lies ahead of the Coen brothers? (We'll soon get a considerable hint: another film of theirs is already finished.) Will they move on from early murder movies, as Kubrick did, to considerable achievements? Will they refine their murder pictures, like Hitchcock? Or will they join De Palma, now up to his nose in his gilded cesspool? Stay tuned. But in a year that saw the débuts of Eagle Pennell (*Last Night at the Alamo*) and Jim Jarmusch (*Stranger than Paradise*), the Coen brothers seem only smart-ass. No, smart half-ass.

### ***My First Wife*, by Paul Cox (*New Republic*, 29 April 1985)**

The opening shot of *My First Wife*, before and under the credits, is typical of the film: it's a cliché that becomes fresh and urgent. A train speeds toward us at night, then past us, and as the lighted windows whiz by, the credits are superimposed. Not exactly novel. Then the very intensity of the shot makes the streaming light seem impatient, trying to brush the words aside to get on with the story. Later, we see that the passing of trains and ships is a recurrent motif. But what is typical of this opening shot is its daring: throughout the work, the director has not been afraid to use the familiar, knowing that why he has to use it and what he means to do with it will make



it vital.

The result is a triumph. The Australian director, Paul Cox, born in 1940, has been making films for twenty years. I've seen two earlier ones, *Lonely Hearts* and *Man of Flowers*, both of which dealt with eccentric middle-aged bachelors. Both were deft and mildly serious but were somewhat self-conscious "little" films. Here, collaborating on his screenplay with Bob Ellis, Cox has faced a subject that is both hugely common and huge, the breakup of a marriage. With two extraordinarily fine actors, John Hargreaves, whom I've seen in small roles, and Wendy Hughes, whom I've seen in several prominent ones, Cox strikes deep into agony, bitter paradox, near intoxication through suffering, and thus strikes deep into the hazards of love.

After that opening shot, we hear the chorus of Furies in Gluck's *Orfeo*, and on those voices, we glide into the home of a musician. It's in a suburb of Melbourne. We see Wendy Hughes in the bedroom making love, and we soon learn that the man is not her husband. The husband is John Hargreaves, a composer who makes his living by teaching and by doing radio shows about music. He is in fact broadcasting the *Orfeo* excerpt that is heard in his home while his wife is busy in bed.

The composer is fiercely in love with his wife, mad about their small daughter, passionate about his work. The wife is constrained and soon tells him what she has been holding back chiefly out of consideration, wry though that thought may be: the news that she no longer loves him and wants to move out, with their daughter. The situation is even more painful, an equally wry thought, because her decision has nothing to do with her afternoon friend; she doesn't love that man, he is merely her lover. The simple, grim fact is that one partner in a marriage no longer wants to be in the marriage. It is a caprice of fate, but no more capricious than falling in love was at the outset. It is cruel to the other person but no crueller than it would be to the changed partner to remain.

This film, despite publicity statements to the contrary, is not about new independence in women. Unhappy wives have been fairly free to leave ever since Nora slammed the door in Ibsen's *A Doll House*; in the twentieth century, surely, it's been as common for the wife to leave as for the husband. Further, the break can occur as suddenly—so far as our conscious minds can warn us—in one partner as in the other. For all of Hargreaves' shock and anguish, he has no way of being positive that the same change would never have occurred in him. The pressing irony is that Hargreaves plunges into terrible hell, even attempts suicide, while Hughes, far from callous, can and will do nothing about it. More, in obligation to her own being, she must do nothing about it. Indeed, she almost comes to resent his suffering as if he were accusing her of malevolence.

Running through their story is the simultaneous account of the dying and death of Hargreaves' father, a Russian émigré whom the son loves very much. Although the weak old man doesn't know about his son's marital troubles, one day when Hargreaves visits the hospital the father tells him that years ago his wife, Hargreaves' mother, fell in love with another man, but that the marriage was maintained, if differently. (In the last sequence at the graveside, the widow's complete emotional breakdown, her utter ravaging by loss, is a comment on the varieties of love. We know that she had once wanted to leave her husband, that she had never stopped loving the other man.) Possibly as a result of this story, Hargreaves and Hughes attempt a reconciliation, but in their marriage bed, a quarrel erupts again, and they split again.

Hargreaves, a sort of younger Trevor Howard, exudes power and humiliating

impotence, fire, and helplessness. If one factor in this film is to be praised above others, which is probably a mistake, it's his performance, scalding and pitiful. Besides having played in films and much television, he has had wide experience in the Australian theater, including plays of Shakespeare, Wilde, Brecht, and Williams. (He did *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with Hughes.) His work in *My First Wife* puts him quite certainly in the front rank of contemporary film actors.

Hughes is beautiful, with the crescent-moon profile found in many lovely women of English stock, and is an actress of range and intelligence. I first became aware of her as the heroine's aunt in *My Brilliant Career*; among other films of hers that I've seen was Cox's *Lonely Hearts*, in which she played a nearly middle-aged, cautious spinster. This was a notable achievement because of her sexuality, which is not only a personal attribute but part of her art. (As it is with Jeanne Moreau, for instance.) She has vivid imagination and the ability to sustain the unspoken. Often in this film, when she and Hargreaves quarrel, she turns away from him impatiently and looks off into space. Cox keeps the frame a two-shot, instead of cutting to Hargreaves alone, because he knows that Hughes can sustain the looking off into space with what is going through her mind.

Cox and Ellis have written with pungency and with just enough cliché to show that there is no more a new way of saying "I don't love you anymore" than there is of saying "I love you." The freshness comes from fidelity to character and from the acting. Cox has also used memory sequences, as Hargreaves recalls the past at times, shot tellingly with graininess and slow motion. (The footage of the birth of the daughter is said to be footage of Hughes's own delivery of her child a few years ago. This makes Hughes the second woman to use such fact in fiction. The other was Lili Monori in the Hungarian picture *Nine Months*.) In these sequences as in the whole of the work, Cox has had sensitive help from his cinematographer, Yuri Sokol, Russian-born and Soviet-trained, who immigrated to Australia in 1979, and who has worked with Cox on several previous films.

Special mention must be made of the marvelous editing, done by Tim Lewis (under Cox's supervision, I'm sure). The film seems to move swiftly along filaments of feeling, of thought, always just a shade ahead of our expectation, sometimes giving us almost sensory gratification by, for example, cutting from a close scene to a slow pan of a chorus rehearsal. One of the best touches, just because of its position and timing, is a shot of Hughes sitting on a staircase, motionless, worrying about her daughter, who has been kidnapped by Hargreaves. The sense of the film's movement is the sense one gets from a skilled pianist's fingers on the keyboard; that movement makes the music, of course, but is in itself pleasurable.

"*Che farò senza Euridice?*" (What will I do without Euridice?) Orfeo's plaint is heard near the end. After we think the closure a bit neat, the aptness a bit too apt, we recognize that it is not Cox's choice, it is the husband's own: he is playing the air on a broadcast because it speaks for him. *My First Wife* deals humanely with a terrifying subject. The happiness of human beings, so proud of their faculties, is at the mercy of chance: which person happens to fall in love with another, or doesn't happen to, or stops being in love.

The last shot is in the cemetery, Hargreaves and Hughes walking away from his father's grave, their child walking between them. The end. It seems unsettled, ambiguous. Then we remember the title.

***The Color Purple*, by Steven Spielberg (New Republic, 27 January 1986)**

The history of black actors in Hollywood films has few surprises: it closely reflects current social attitudes. (By “Hollywood” I mean white-controlled films made anywhere in America; the black film industry, which began making features in 1918, is a quite different subject.) Before sound, black actors were cast as “Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks,” as Donald Bogle says in his book of that title. Leading black roles, when they occurred, were played by white actors in blackface. For example, in 1927 Warner Brothers made a picture about two black comics in World War I. They were called Ham and Eggs: the picture was *Ham and Eggs at the Front*. The leads were played by two white men blacked up. The script was by Darryl Zanuck, and the female lead was played by Myrna Loy in blackface.

The arrival of sound, which provided the chance to use black music, inevitably altered matters somewhat. As early as 1929, two all-black features were made in Hollywood: *Hearts of Dixie*, directed by the now-forgotten Paul Sloane, and *Hallelujah*, directed by the well-remembered King Vidor, who had already done *The Big Parade* and *The Crowd*. From time to time through the next three decades, pictures with black casts—or nearly all-black—came along once in a while; of course, in the last dozen or so years, they have appeared much more frequently.

Now—and it’s a landmark—the most successful director-producer in the world history of film has directed and produced a virtually all-black film. The juncture of Steven Spielberg and a black subject reflects current American society as black employment in film has always done, but in this case there’s an extra dimension. Spielberg has become a golden eminence not just through talent, which he certainly has, but also, perhaps especially, because he is not the least bit shrewd. He is open and self-gratifying. It’s easy to imagine the story conferences at which a lot of latter-day black films were cooked up to cash in on what’s happening. It’s impossible to imagine anything like that with Spielberg. He makes us feel that, as producer or producer-director, he makes films that he himself wants to see. He apparently operates on the assumption that if he wants to see it, the international film public will also want it, an assumption that is now pretty well validated. So it’s significant that he wanted to see, thus wanted to make, a film of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. If Spielberg is a congenital vicar for an immense public, which he seems to be, then an immense public is ready for a black film that tells some unpleasant facts about black American life.

Walker’s novel won a Pulitzer Prize and an American Book Award and has been read by millions. (This is no guarantee of film success; the past is strewn with failed film transcriptions of bestsellers.) Except for one salient episode, *The Color Purple* is not about black-white relations: it is about blacks. Specifically, it is about the mistreatment, the abuse, of black women by black men. As literature, Walker’s book seems to me to have much the same relation to, say, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* that *The Exorcist* has to *The Turn of the Screw*. Walker’s novel is often affecting, but at a somewhat elemental level. The book is composed of letters, most of them written in so-called Black English that in itself evokes pathos. Celie, the heroine, addresses letters to God. (Later there are more literate and much less moving letters from her sister, who escapes from rural Georgia to become a missionary in Africa.) “Dear

God,” begins the book, “I am fourteen years old.” Then come two crossed-out words. Then: “I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.” That salutation, those crossed-out words, the bewildered appeal launch the book at once on its accessible way.

God gives Celie plenty of signs of what is happening to her, most of them oppressive, but Celie endures, with taciturn courage. A sketch for those who don’t know the book: the story follows this Georgia farm girl from 1909 to 1931. Her stepfather gives her two babies, then takes them away. She doesn’t know where they are. Then he hands her over for marriage to a widower who had come to ask for Celie’s sister. Her husband tyrannizes her and taunts her with his passion for a band vocalist. Celie, continually jeered at as ugly, is first told otherwise by the singer. Sex to Celie has merely meant submission to men. It is a woman, this singer, who introduces her to sexual pleasure. Celie matures, achieves independence, eventually returns to her husband, and at last is reunited with her missionary sister, who also brings Celie’s children home.

The book might have been written for Spielberg. Walker and he are both genuine, both skilled practitioners of popular art. It seems inevitable that this should be the book to switch him, temporarily anyway, from space sagas and kid stories. About the only serious adjustment that Spielberg and his screenwriter, Menno Meyjes, had to make in the book was to diminish the lesbian element, which is only implied.

Allen Daviau has photographed the film in colors that are the visual equivalent of Quincy Jones’s lush music: Spielberg apparently feels that the flooding music and color transcend artifice because of the authenticity they adorn. Moreover, Spielberg keeps the camera below eye-level a good deal of the time, often near floor-level, looking upward as if to assert that he feels the story is epic.

For Celie, Spielberg, with his usual good instincts, chose Whoopi Goldberg. Her stage name is some sort of joke that she is now stuck with: her abilities deserve better. She is a solo performer of sketches she herself creates. Her Broadway appearance last year demonstrated that her performing talent is better than her writing. Goldberg’s future in film is a wide-open question, I’d say, unless there is a place for a female Eddie Murphy; but as Celie, she is perfect.

Danny Glover, the widower who weds her reluctantly, goes from strength to strength as an actor. Up to now, he has played sympathetic roles—notably, the vagrant in *Places in the Heart*. Here he plays a brute who mellows with the years. Glover makes the younger man both terrifying and understandable, and makes the mellowing as credible as anyone could do.

Two women are outstanding. Oprah Winfrey is a plump proud woman who pays grievously for her pride. Margaret Avery is Shug (short for Sugar), the singer who bewitches Celie’s husband but whose love turns out to be the liberation of Celie’s spirit. Avery is worldly wise, yet warm and lovely.

The film travels a bit errantly and sluggishly toward the happy ending we know it must have, whether or not we’ve read the book, but Spielberg’s convictions carry it through: his conviction that this is now the moment for a mass-appeal film on these aspects of black life and his conviction about happy endings. Clearly he believes that happy endings are integral to film, that they are what film is for. These two convictions, of instance and of principle, sustain this picture.

**Kaos, Paolo & Vittorio Taviani (*New Republic*, 17 March 1986)**

Composers from Haydn to Bartók have used folk tunes in their work, transforming them into art without losing their original pith. Writers of fiction, especially of short stories, have often made cognate transformations of folk material. These stories grow from incidents observed or heard of, rather than from the author's subjectivity. In fact, short stories might be roughly classified as belonging to one group or the other. Preeminent among the folkloric writers is Luigi Pirandello. His plays are highly subjective, often metaphysical. But (besides some novels) Pirandello, who was Sicilian, wrote over 300 stories. Those that I have read—a few of the many—have been folkloric accounts of Sicilian life, stories that he seems (repeat: seems) merely to have recorded. If there is a substantive difference between the words “tale” and “story,” the Pirandello pieces I know are tales.

In their new film the Taviani brothers, Paolo and Vittorio, have taken four of his Sicilian tales and told three of them well. They have also added a biographical epilogue. The overall title, *Kaos*, is pointless, even though an epigraph from Pirandello explains that, near his birthplace, there is a forest whose name is a Sicilian corruption of the Greek word for “chaos.” (Incidentally, this is the second current film whose title is a foreign word for “chaos,” the other being Kurosawa's *Ran*.) The Taviani brothers are Communists, which is relevant because most of their previous work has been politically radical. And most of it that I've seen has been ponderously arty: *Allonsanfàn*, *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, and *The Meadow* (about politically “stranded” youth). The best film of theirs that I know, *Padre Padrone*, set in Sardinia, was not political; and, though freighted with aesthetic mechanisms, it has some stubborn vigor.

Now, with no hint of politics, the Tavianis have done the loveliest work of theirs to come my way. It doesn't seem so at the start. Some peasants capture a crow and tie a tiny bell around its neck, then release the bird to tinkle across the sky. I braced myself for Art. The belled crow, together with shots of the gorgeous landscape over which it flies, is seen between the separate episodes of the film, superfluously. But the use of the crow is probably related to the fact that makes the whole enterprise too long. The four stories plus epilogue run three-and-a-half hours. The producer was RAI, the Italian TV network, and I assume that *Kaos* began as a television series, with the flying crow as the “signature” before each installment. Seen at one sitting, the aggregate is too long, the crow business is irrelevant, and the whole matter is worsened because the last two parts are the weakest.

To dispose of all the defects: the three best sections would themselves benefit by some condensation. The Tavianis insist on close-ups of important objects and always hold them too long. When we see a woman quite obviously cleaning a floor by pushing two cloths around with her bare feet, the camera has to come in and italicize the way she is cleaning. Recurrently the directors become so fond of a spectacular shot that they linger. But compared with the way they have handled these and other matters in the past, they are positively light-fingered here.

Let's begin the praise with their cinematographer, Giuseppe Lanci, a name new to me. Lanci makes the Sicilian landscape poor and rich at the same time: he shows us how difficult it is to wrest a living from this hard earth and also conveys why Sicilians love it. The terrain has a general tone of light brown—of course varied but seemingly all dry—at the same time that the shapes of fields, the narrow roads between high stone walls, the hill towns, the nestled farmhouses declare the investment of many lives for many centuries. Lanci's palette and framing illustrate the

difference between sentiment and sentimentality. Then there are the costumes by Lina Nelvi Taviani. I assume their authenticity—late nineteenth and early twentieth century—but anyone can appreciate their textures, almost tangible, and their articulation, from the homemade shoes to the sleeveless sheepskin coats, which again embody traditions poor and proud.

The first of the three best stories, “The Other Son,” deals with a middle-aged woman who has been trying for years to send letters to her two sons in America, with her anguish because she has had no reply, and with her blunt rejection of her third son, who lives nearby. He had a different father, and in a long flashback the woman tells a newcomer why she feels different toward this other son. The past narrative takes place in the Garibaldi days, and the key device, the playing of *bocce* with severed heads, is familiar from another Pirandello tale that I read long ago. The Tavianis treat it skillfully: we hear the odd sound of the bowling before we see the reason. Margarita Lozano, who plays the woman, is chosen for the same reason as every other actor in the film: for a face that speaks before and after the voice.

“Moon Sickness” tells of the newlywed bride of a young farmer who now lives with him on a farm an hour from the nearest town. Twenty days after her marriage she discovers that, on the night of the full moon, the farmer is subject to murderous fits. He is sane all the rest of the time, and he proposes that her mother come and stay with her in the locked house, keeping him outside, on the full-moon nights. The mother proposes that a young man accompany her. The bride, who knows and desires the other young man, thinks she will have a chance for some lovemaking while the raving husband is, as requested, shut out. But, like all the tales, this one has a surprise ending that grows logically out of what we know. The husband, Claudio Bigagli, and the other man, a charmer named Massimo Bonetti, dominate the episode.

“The Jar” is a comic tale of conflicting prides. A local estate owner, Don Lollò, orders a huge jar, almost head high, in which to store olive oil. Soon after it arrives it cracks in half, and the don has to call in a humpbacked peasant to mend it. The mending leads to conflict between the two and the full satisfaction of neither.

The fourth story, “Requiem,” is about a farm community’s petition to the local baron for the right to its own cemetery, so that people won’t have to carry their dead miles away to the nearest town. It’s built on odd, harsh fact, but it’s too long for what it has to say. The last section, called an epilogue, is “Conversation with Mother.” Pirandello himself, played by a Taviani familiar, Omero Antonutti, returns from Rome to his Sicilian home after his mother’s death and has a conversation with the revenant old woman. The episode is notable only for a bathing sequence, delicately photographed in the mother’s reminiscence of childhood.

Excepting the protractions in the editing, the Tavianis have directed exceptionally well. Their work has always had a strong theatrical component, but it has usually been hammy. Here the hamminess is restrained, and the restraint has changed that theatrical component from gilt to gold. The mother’s fount of pain in “The Other Son,” the don’s corkscrewing pride in “The Jar” are dramatized without Taviani underscoring. Their theater sense is best exercised in some of the long shots. In the first story, at the beginning of the flashback to Garibaldi days, we look down a long empty street in a town. At the far end, Garibaldi rides across from left to right, slowly, alone. Seconds later, some of his company follow, slowly. It is a quiet statement about morale. In “The Jar” there are many high shots of the don’s entire large courtyard, with his peasants working or not working at various jobs—a ballet made out of dailiness. Pirandello’s Sicily has brought out the best in the Taviani

brothers from Pisa.

***The Mission*, by Roland Joffé (*New Republic*, 1 December 1986)**

*The Mission* is the *Heaven's Gate* of 1986: a large-scale, spectacular, ambitious work on a serious theme that fails to clarify that theme, realize its characters, and develop organically. After the first ten minutes or so, I thought: "All right, now we know what you want to do. Please start over again and get it right." What I can't understand—doubtless it's naïve—is why so many experienced filmmakers couldn't have seen the same thing, why they couldn't spot the flaws in the screenplay before shooting started. Failure is obviously a risk in all filmmaking, as in all art, and has struck some of the best; but to fail with such apparent insistence on failing makes me think that all the people in charge have lemming blood in them.

The story takes place in the 1750s in the area where present-day Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet. The Jesuit order had established missions in that area, and the film's conflict, historically based, is between the Jesuits on the one hand and the governments of Spain and Portugal on the other. When I first heard of *The Mission*, I thought at once of *The Strong Are Lonely*, a play on the same subject by the Austrian dramatist Fritz Hochwälder, which I saw on Broadway in 1953. (It's included in a collection of Hochwälder's plays published by Ungar.) Subsequently I read, in a *New York Times* article by Judith Miller, that an Italian producer, Fernando Ghia, had been sparked by the subject of the play—its subject only—and had commissioned an original screenplay from Robert Bolt, author of *Lawrence of Arabia* and other big screenplays. What a pity, as it turns out, that Bolt didn't adapt *The Strong Are Lonely*, which pits the (we might say) socialized Jesuit state in central South America against the imperial and commercial interests of Europe. The Jesuits lose, but by their loss they preserve governmental protection of their order in Europe.

Hochwälder's work is a thesis play with poster characters and contrived climaxes, but it does make crystal clear and elementally effective what it is about. Bolt slimmed down the political-social aspects of the subject, puffed up the religious aspect into movie pietism, provided a set of characters who are not even good posters, and capped his elaborate action with a simplified battle climax that is childish as the coda of a work on a serious theme. The dialogue, usually excellent in a Bolt script, is insipid. I can quote lines from *Lawrence*; I don't want to quote any from *The Mission*. (Is it Bolt's dialogue? Or subsequent tamperings?) Further, a message is tacked on the very end, telling us that the cruelties against South American Indians still continue. They certainly do, but that is not the film's subject. *The Mission* is the story of a religious order trying to do God's work in man's world, of the tragedy of Christianity compromised. The abuse of Indians is the locus, not the subject.

With this screenplay in hand, Ghia spent nine years looking for backers. Congratulations to those who declined. Then David Puttnam, who produced *Chariots of Fire*, succumbed. After that mistake came another. The producers engaged Roland Joffé to direct. Joffé showed in his first film, *The Killing Fields*, that he has a good eye but a weak sense of construction, even of mere clarity. These qualities are underscored in *The Mission*. Many of the shots, as individual items, are striking. (The cinematographer was Chris Menges.) The Iguassú waterfalls are like visual Beethoven. Some long shots of a few soldiers being hauled up an immense cliff face

are ingenious. But good shots don't make a film any more than good sentences make a novel. Joff —with his editor Jim Clark—never quite understands which shot ought to follow which in order to “place” us sequentially. He shoots and edits as if he knows there is a film in there somewhere but he can't quite locate it, so he sticks in some more footage instead of refining what he has.

The story is framed by an *ex post facto* letter to the pope dictated by a papal emissary who was sent to adjudicate the difficulties. In flashback, then, we see Father Gabriel, a Jesuit, setting out for Indian country to start a mission, climbing steep rocks to get there. (Later, inexplicably, the emissary is just paddled up river to the mission. No rocks.) In the jungle, Gabriel plays a pipe, like Orpheus, and Indians gather round. Their idyll is interrupted by the attack of a slave trader, Mendoza, who snares some Indians and makes off with them while Gabriel watches helplessly.

Gabriel remains steadfastly good throughout. We never see how he converts hundreds of Indians so quickly and builds a mission with only their help (plus a very few priests), but I suppose these things just come your way if you're good, along with mastery of Indian language. Mendoza is meant to be more complex. He is given hurry-up/revue-sketch complications early on—he kills his brother over a woman. After six solitary months of remorse, he joins Gabriel as a penitent, then becomes a priest. In the climactic assault on the mission by Spanish troops, Mendoza renounces the priesthood to join the battle, while Gabriel refuses to fight. Both are killed—which fact is the one resonant comment in the film.

Jeremy Irons plays Gabriel as authentically as the cardboard of the character permits. We're told that Irons went on a Jesuit retreat before filming “to understand more fully the Jesuit view of life and faith.” With a role written and directed like this one, Irons might as well have spent the time at a Club Med.

Robert De Niro plays Mendoza—just about perceptibly. The role is no better written than Gabriel, but Irons at least tries. The volcanically talented De Niro has never given such a perfunctory performance, full of long “meaningful” stares that are meant to supply content to a vacuous character. De Niro has accepted some parts he ought to have left alone, but not since 1900 has he given such depressing proof of that fact.

All the other characters are off the shelf. There are a Portuguese diplomat (a good actor, Ronald Pickup) who is cynical about his cynicism; the emissary (another good actor, Ray McAnally) who goes through trite tussles between truth and expediency; a Spanish planter and slave trader who makes Simon Legree look subtle (Chuck Low, a plump actor whose espresso-bar accent and manner render his scenes ridiculous). There are also many Indians, young and old, male and female, all of unstained innocence. I wondered, then, why the females, bare-breasted before and after, wear white dresses during the emissary's visit to the mission.

Twenty-two million dollars. Nine years of scrounging for arrangements, more than four months of location shooting in Colombian and other South American wilds under grueling conditions. This is not exactly the first time that great sums and great trouble have been expended on a film that turned out dreadful; but neither is it the first time I've wondered why no one, before or during shooting, had a glimmer of what's now glaring. Well, perhaps at some point the people in charge of *The Mission* had more than a glimmer but thought, along with Macbeth, “I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er.” So they waded on. To bring us this.



***Bird*, by Clint Eastwood (*New Republic*, 31 October 1988)**

Biographies are a constant in films, so it's just coincidence, not a trend, that a bunch of them have been released together in the past several weeks. *Tucker*, Coppola's underpowered study of the auto inventor, chugged past recently; here are three more, leaning on lives to give them substance.

Clint Eastwood has long loved the music of Charlie "Bird" Parker, and because of that love he has made a film of Parker's life, called *Bird*. The equation is odd: he loves the music, therefore he films the life. Of course a similar equation has produced numberless films, about singers and composers and painters and writers and more, but in many of those cases, the lives themselves were dramatic—or at least substantively interesting. Parker's life was sad, but it was a self-induced, monochromatic sadness. He had, within the bounds of the undervalued jazz world of his day, success; he had a devoted, if acerbic, wife; he harried himself into an early grave with drink and drugs. So this is the story of a gifted man, a jazz saxophonist who affected more than jazz, who was simply incapable of not destroying himself. We watch 163 minutes—distended minutes, too—of case history, as Bird goes from boyhood in Kansas City to death in Boston in 1955 at the age of thirty-four. Scott Fitzgerald's familiar line is used as epigraph: "There are no second acts in American lives." Bird's life (as distinct from his music) barely had a first act.

What the film does have, however, is texture. The cinematographer, Jack N. Green, has kept the film tenebrous and menacing, sometimes barely visible. Bird lives his life in the shadows, and this is all the more telling because he is not—as shown here, anyway—a morose man. He's rather genial, accepting of his fate. Obviously the most important part of the film's texture is the music track. It was devised by Lennie Niehaus to enhance a large number of Charlie Parker recordings, along with other pieces. To a jazz tyro's ears, it sounds very good indeed.

The two leading actors ring true. Forest Whitaker, as Bird, is a large, pleasant person who seems to float on whatever happens to him, yet as he suggests, there is that within his bulk which passeth show. Diane Venora, as his white wife, is hard-bitten by circumstances but also by her love for this wayward man. The screenplay by Joel Oliansky mixes the pedestrian and the strainedly lyric. The dialogue and scene construction are banal, and Oliansky tries to vary matters with flashbacks, which don't help much. He's so hard-up for drama that he converts the federal narcotics agent trailing Bird into a sort of Gestapo figure, as if Bird weren't breaking drug laws, and the agent had no right to watch him.

Eastwood has been highly praised for his direction because, though he has directed before, people seem to be surprised that he knows a lot about films. In fact he's an old hand who has worked with many old hands. (I once saw him in an episode of an Italian anthology film directed by Vittorio De Sica in which he played a husband whose wife is bored with him!) Eastwood remembers a number of good things that can be done with a camera, but some of his use of actors is stilted. And he remembers a bit too much, like the touches of 1930s symbolism. A cymbal sails slowly through space a couple of times; and at the moment of Bird's death, on a stormy night, there's a rumble of thunder.

***Patty Hearst*, by Paul Schrader (*New Republic*, 31 October 1988)**

*Patty Hearst*, the story of same, is a disaster, written by Nicholas Kazan and

directed by Paul Schrader, whose previous disaster was *Mishima*. Schrader was so intent on not doing a straightforward narrative film, on giving the picture a personal stylistic imprint, that he completely vitiated the enterprise. The conventional view, Hearst's subjective view, other heavily shadowed quasi-expressionist views, an interplay of symbolic references: all these are mixed to make us conscious of effort, nothing more.

Apart from the absolute terror of the experience for Hearst—in the early days of the kidnapping, at least—the astonishing point about the facts of this case for me is their resemblance to previous fiction. A kidnapped woman responds sexually to her kidnapper(s). The earliest example I know is *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, by James Hadley Chase. But Schrader fumbles even this psychosexual element because of his cinematic ostentation. All that really come through are the theatrics of the Symbionese Liberation Army and the desperation of radicals trying to believe that a popular response to their cause really exists.

As Hearst, Natasha Richardson (Vanessa Redgrave's daughter) does well with the American accent but is ineffectual. Perhaps Hearst really was/is a ninny; if so, Richardson hasn't succeeded in *portraying* her as one, she is simply the *Ding an sich*.

***Rain Man*, by Barry Levinson (*New Republic*, 9 & 16 January 1989)**

Dustin Hoffman, an extraordinary talent, plays an autistic savant in *Rain Man*. This sort of mental case was once called an idiot savant, a person severely limited in powers, emotionally unstable, and socially malfunctioning, but with fantastic ability in restricted ways. This man, for example, can memorize pages of a telephone book at a glance, at a glance can count the number of toothpicks that have fallen out of a box, in a flash can answer complex arithmetical questions. But he can't take care of himself.

As we'd expect, Hoffman prepared carefully for the role by observation, reading, and consultation with experts. Presumably he's got it right. To a layman he's utterly convincing. The next question is: is it acting? Or is it only replication?

Related to this, in the Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *Theater*, Daniel Gerould wrote fascinatingly about a group called SIMULATIONS. It's made up of Equity actors, based in New Jersey, who perform at medical meetings and clinics. A member of the group, well-briefed and rehearsed, will "do" an arthritic person or a heart attack victim or whatever is required so graphically and authentically that a medical lecturer is able to use the performance to illustrate symptoms. Technically, this is acting, for the basic banal reason that the performer is not really suffering from the affliction. But the name of the group is the best description of this activity. The actor of Richard III does more than realistically simulate a hunched back and a limp.

Hoffman does what he can with the role, but in the main, he is just given different sets of circumstances in which to display the man's symptoms. Newspaper stories tell us that he was quite aware of the risk he ran in doing a part that could not progress or even significantly alter but that he wanted to do it anyway. Well, now he has done it, and I hope he is content with the replication.

Further, the replication is placed within a screenplay—by Ronald Bass and Barry Morrow—that is one more rerun of a weary TV genre: find a disease or an impairment that is dramatic, knock together some Big Scenes around it, then tie the whole thing up with hopeful tears. In *Rain Man* the results are a bit stiffer than usual

because the ailing person can't cognitively participate in the story and because there's no real point in the whole enterprise, nothing to be learned from it. A film about, say, AIDS could teach us something about AIDS, about attitudes toward it, but what specifically is the point in knowing more about an autistic savant? There's a faint scent of exploitation in the air. ("Hey, no one's ever done *this* before.")

Tom Cruise plays a smoothie car salesman in Los Angeles who discovers that he has an older brother, Hoffman, in an Ohio mental home and that their father, recently deceased, left his whole sizable fortune to that brother. Cruise abducts Hoffman from the home and sets out for L.A. with him in hope of getting half the estate as ransom from the director of the home, who is the trustee. Would you believe—*try*—that en route across the country by car Cruise becomes genuinely fond of his brother? And not just because Hoffman's memory for figures helps Cruise to win \$85,000 in Las Vegas.

Cruise himself is becoming a real star, confident and gleaming. But neither he nor Hoffman nor the cleverness of the director, Barry Levinson, can prevail against a screenplay that has a beginning at the Ohio home, a finish in L.A., and nothing much in between. Cruise's occasional outbursts of angry frustration, Hoffman's occasional touches of panic, the long shots of gorgeous Western scenery, are only fillers.

***How to Get Ahead in Advertising*, by Bruce Robinson (New Republic, 5 June 1989)**

Our ad-inundated culture has had in it for decades a contrapuntal vein of satire—in fiction, plays, and films—to the point that satire on advertising is now a component of our advertising culture. What has changed, however, in recent years, is the *focus* of the satire. Originally, it was directed against Madison Avenue. Latterly, it has been aimed at the whole world that contains and accepts Madison Avenue as a life-giving artery. This phenomenon, the acceptance of advertising hype as a given—as probably untrue but who cares?—is the subject of *How to Get Ahead in Advertising*.

As Andrew Sullivan has written, "British skills in language, presentation, irony have been central to British domination, even in the United States, of the ad industry." The author-director of this film, Bruce Robinson, uses skills in language, irony, and presentation to attack that domination. Robinson was an actor (the English lieutenant in Truffaut's *Story of Adèle H.*), then wrote the screenplay of *The Killing Fields*, then became a writer-director for *Withnail and I* in 1987. That poignant film, about two young Englishmen leaving the 1960s, sticks in the mind: its enlarged language and performance reflected a reticent culture in exceptional, heated conditions. *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* takes this quality even further, as if the hothouse life of the ad agency were becoming not anomalous, but English society in extremis.

At the start Richard E. Grant (who played Withnail), a Copysmith Star-Class, is addressing a company meeting. He circles the table with a long speech in which he sets the ground for a forthcoming campaign, for all campaigns to come—a composite of the average British consumer, drawn with discomfiting perception, rapier slash. Every food they merchandise, he says, must be low in something. If not, it must be high in something else. But the new crisis he faces is daunting, despite his knowledge—not a food but a pimple cream. He must come up with a name for the cream and a campaign by Monday.

The film's first half hour or so, bitingly comic, takes Grant through the storms of office crisis and personal torment, including a talk with his cool but adroitly pressuring boss. (On the boss's wall hangs a copy of Sargent's portrait of Henry James.) He even simmers at lunch with his wife, who is used to helping him through these tempests. What keeps us fixed in this first portion, full of familiar material, is the daringly virtuosic performance by Grant, the charm of Rachel Ward as his wife, the serpentine clamminess of Richard Wilson as the boss, and Robinson's pyrotechnical writing.

Then the film, though still comic, changes mode—from fevered realism to symbolic fantasy. We are looking at the exterior of Grant's *luxe* country house when suddenly two cartoon birds fly out of the chimney, swoop, and flutter. This surprise Disney touch signals the shift. Grant develops a boil on his neck; the boil swells rapidly, then acquires eyes, a mouth—a voice. His wife of course thinks that he's developed the boil under pimple-cream pressure and has flipped under the same pressure. A doctor is called, a psychiatrist is consulted, friends are insulted by the frantic Grant. In due course—due, that is, as the symbolism becomes clear—the boil, whose voice is satanic, grows big enough to take over the body of Grant himself while the original Grant, who had some traces of Good in him, himself becomes a boil on the Bad Grant's neck.

The new Bad Grant looks exactly like the Good one, plus mustache, so he completely takes the other's place, athletically enjoys his wife, and pushes any redeeming qualities of the former Grant right out of the picture. There is hope, however, because the pustule of Good still remains on his neck; but meanwhile the Bad exults in triumph and means to push on to even greater glories in Adland.

Paired with *Withnail, How to Get Ahead in Advertising* establishes Robinson as a fine-tuned temperament and a keen mind with plentiful talent to use them both. A salute to the producers George Harrison, Denis O'Brien, and Ray Cooper for midwifing this eccentric, disquieting film. And a further salute to Grant, for whom Robinson quite obviously wrote the script. Grant has a voice and an ear, force and wit and lithe presence. Much, I hope, lies ahead of him.

### ***The Handmaid's Tale*, by Volker Schlöndorff (New Republic, 19 March 1990)**

The future has a long past. For centuries, writers of fiction and plays have shaped the future in various ways, and they've been joined in this century by screenwriters. Almost always the future has been used to say something about the present, and occasionally it's memorable. If the work has inner consistency and vivifying imagination, it can often chill us, as we note how near and nearly inevitable a particular future seems.

No chill in the film made from Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, because the consistency is thin and the imagination isn't vivid, even though the screenplay is by Harold Pinter. The setting is "the recent future" in a new state on this continent, a highly militarized state (besieged by rebels) in which machoism, racism, homophobia, and religious fundamentalism prevail. Those elements are certainly apparent enough today, and possibly they could wax, but the Atwood-Pinter treatment of them is simultaneously mechanical and facile. Instead of being frightened by possibility, we almost nod in recognition as one scare topic after another is exploited somewhat smugly.

Issues like the ones in this film—issues of any kind—haven't much concerned

Pinter in his career. Mostly he has devoted himself to playwriting of unique and exquisite surreality, with a vision that pierces the diurnal to disclose its mysteries. In a few recent short plays—generally overrated, as if to congratulate Pinter for giving up all that nebulous stuff and getting down to issues—he has dealt with political oppression. Perhaps it was as a reward for coming to his social senses that he was asked to do this screenplay. In any case, it is by far his worst. All his screenplays have been adaptations, of his own plays or of other people's novels, and they range in quality from the plain workmanship of *The Quiller Memorandum* to the genius of *The Proust Screenplay*. It's certainly conceivable that he might have improved *The Handmaid's Tale* with a fiery plunge into its essentials that realized its themes, mended its meanderings, and raised it out of sexy futurist soap opera. Instead, almost lazily, Pinter has merely trailed after Atwood, and produced garish science fiction.

Ryuichi Sakamoto's music starts us off with lots of lower-colon rumblings. We open in a snowy landscape as a young couple and their small child are trying to cross a border. Lights flash on, and an amplified voice warns them to stop. Dad, for no sane reason, ventures out alone and is gunned down. (Well, there is a reason: the script needs to get rid of him.) Then Mom, Natasha Richardson, rushes to him and is captured by troops. They drag her off and abandon the child. (Retrospectively this seems strange because the new regime is avid for children. However, it does provide chances, during the first hour, for the film to cut away from Richardson's adventures to the child wandering in the snow and calling "Mommy.")

We are introduced to the new regime—immense barracks, stockyard handling of human beings, many soldiers, many stern female guards armed with electric prods. Young white fertile women are isolated as brood mares; they are called handmaids and are all dressed identically in red. (Women in every group—wives, maids, etc.—are all dressed in one color.) Richardson, who forgets her dead husband and abandoned child unless the script reminds her of them from time to time, is assigned to the home of the Commander, Robert Duvall, because his wife, Faye Dunaway, is sterile. Dunaway is delighted that Richardson is going to bear Duvall's child; the state's ritual demands that the wife be present at the impregnation attempts.

I interrupt this synopsis, which may make the film sound less ridiculous than it is, to note that Igor Luther, the cinematographer who did so well for Wajda's *Danton*, shoots everything in tones that are exceptionally precise, almost inhumanly exact, which is just right for the film. Luther's work is the film's best asset. But it can't redeem the whole, which seems like a more expensive and sophisticated spin-off from Saturday afternoon sci-fi serials.

One reason that all these characters, rulers and underlings, seem phony is that they are always being hustled through prisms of emotion. Especially Richardson. Anger, fear, longing, despair, whatever—they swish by like the spotlights that keep sweeping around at night. Nothing can really register because everything seems under the gun—not of the police but of the director. He is Volker Schlöndorff, the German who worked his *gedämpfte* wiles on *The Tin Drum* and *Swann in Love*. True, he has some sense of pace and space: nothing is languorous or remote. But he has no sense of the ridiculous. He doesn't know when an emotional encounter is so compressed that it seems funny—as are the swift series of such high-speed encounters.

Among the actors Richardson suffers most. I saw her first as Nina in a London production of *The Seagull* that starred her mother, Vanessa Redgrave, and she was adequate. Her film career has been less than happy. Her last major part was the title role in *Patty Hearst*, in which she was dim. Here she seems puny—but admittedly it's

a part for a marionette.

Dunaway, as the Commander's wife, does one more of her Dragon Ladies. Duvall, the Commander, shows only how an excellent actor can waste his time.

***Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion*, by Viacheslav Krishtofovich (New Republic, 19 March 1990)**

*Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion* is an unusual Soviet film, though that adjective may soon become inappropriate. What was once thought of as the usual Soviet film may fade away. This well-turned screenplay by Viktor Merezhko is close, intimate, finely calibrated. Essentially it's a two-character picture, though other people function in the story.

Klavdia, a forty-two-year-old seamstress in Kiev, puts up notices on five telephone poles inviting the attention of single men. The first man who rings the doorbell of her small apartment is a pleasant drunk named Valentin. (She never meets another candidate.) Reluctantly she allows him to come in though she is unattracted. He turns out to be not only clever but intelligent and perceptive, and though things start rather roughly—in their first meeting he tries to rob her, and she crowns him with an ironing board—a relationship of tacit feelings, needs, recognitions develops. At the finish the future is left somewhat open-ended and nebulous for Klavdia, yet a clearer finish, happy or not, might have seemed too neat.

Viacheslav Krishtofovich, the director, has worked a good deal in television. This may have been the perfect preparation for his first feature. Most of it is between two people, mostly the camera is in close, and he deals with these facts as opportunity, not constriction. Directing as if it were a chamber work, more reliant on nuance than on large climax, Krishtofovich brings off the film very well.

Alexander Zbruev, as Valentin, gives a performance like a self-peeling onion, except that at the center there is a complex man. Irina Kupchenko, as Klavdia, is an actress of dignity, humor, and despair, with the ability to fill silences with self. The four main artists—writer, director, and two principal actors—make this film a small, savory treat.

***The Belly of an Architect*, by Peter Greenaway (New Republic, 4 June 1990)**

The success, or at least the notoriety, of Peter Greenaway's latest film, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover*, has prompted the release of one of the films he made between *The Draughtsman's Contract* and the new one. *The Belly of an Architect* was done in 1987, and its release adds to the puzzlements of Greenaway's career.

Because he has established himself as an intelligence and as a visual connoisseur, we look in his films for intelligent reason to support their visual being. This time, with Sacha Vierny again as his cinematographer, we can be sure that our eyes will feast, and the assurance is double because the setting is Rome. Greenaway and Vierny find ways to see the city that simultaneously remind us of what we know yet present it in new perspectives, new baths of light. A series of color stills from this film would be a poor present to give someone who is going to Rome for the first time because he or she is unlikely to see it in this innovative way.

But what, I must ask as I did about *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover*, is it all for? The later film labors an obvious allegory about appetites and

cruelties. I can't say that this earlier one is equally obvious, it's just vacant. Food, as the title suggests, once again is important: feastings of various kinds recur. Sexual appetite, too, is again present. But wherefore?

The architect is an American in his fifties. (The character's name is Stourley—pronounced Stoorly—Kracklite. Not exactly a name to conjure with.) He comes to Rome with his young wife to mount an exhibition of the work of Étienne-Louis Boullée, the eighteenth-century French architect who is his idol. Boullée's abstract, geometrical clarity is supposed to have some resonance in the film, undetected by me. During the months in which the exhibition is being prepared, the architect develops abdominal pains, which are ultimately diagnosed as stomach cancer. During the same months he and his wife have differences, and she welcomes the advances of a quasi-professional Italian seducer. The latter has a sophisticated sister with whom he has a bizarre relationship—you know those Europeans—and the sister sets her cap (I euphemize) for the architect. All these ideas are meant to build to a tragic-ironic climax, but absolutely nothing is accomplished in this film other than a series of posings and of doughy dialogues in the middle of beautiful pictures.

Brian Dennehy, an American version of Sean Connery's Mr. Hearty, is the architect, and struggles to make a human being out of a concoction, but he is doomed. The wife is Chloe Webb, so affecting as Nancy in *Sid and Nancy*, who here is out of place and class. Lambert Wilson plays the European seducer of an American wife as an up-to-date version of what Erich von Stroheim did in *Blind Husbands* (1919), *The Devil's Pass Key* (1920), and *Foolish Wives* (1922).

Generalizations about Greenaway must be tentative because so much of his work is unknown in the U.S.—numerous shorts and two other features. But, on the evidence so far, it seems that *The Draughtsman's Contract* was a stroke of luck. This is not to deny his brains and talent, only to note that, a painter by training and a painter still, Greenaway's films seem another form of painterly expression, "justified" by allegorical plot schemes that he hopes will rise to the level of his visual art. Only once so far, with *The Draughtsman*, has his screenplay been as good as his eye. He needs advice, to keep him from wasting his sure talent on his unsure one.

### ***The Nasty Girl*, by Michael Verhoeven (*New Republic*, 26 November 1990)**

There's no chicken-or-egg quandary about theater and film. We know which came first, and we know the legacy that theater bestowed on film—the plays, the ideas of dramatic action, the actors and the acting. We also know that film quickly fought hard to modify this theatrical legacy, to develop its own languages. Less often discussed is what film retained of the theater (like Renoir's deep-focus shot) and what, in more recent years, film has adopted from twentieth-century developments in stagecraft.

A good deal of the latter is used in *The Nasty Girl*, a German film written and directed by Michael Verhoeven. He often isolates figures against an absolutely blank background or uses large atmospheric photographs as backdrops or slips in background comment. For instance, behind a judge in a courtroom, the allegorical figure of Justice snoozes on her throne, snoring a little, until she starts awake and resumes her classic pose. Anyone who has been to interesting theaters in this century has seen devices much like all the above.

Verhoeven uses cinematic abstractions as well. In the middle of veristic sequences, characters address the camera. In one case, he insists that we see the

microphone at the end of a long boom. When members of a family confer on the sofa in their parlor about their town's attitude toward them, the sofa, with them aboard, sails through the town like a barge on a canal.

All these procedures may make the film sound like a fresh, bright comedy. This is a doubtful blessing because the picture, though it has satirical moments, is far from comic. First, there's the title to consider. In German it's *Das schreckliche Mädchen*. "Schreckliche" can mean a number of things—frightful, fearful, dreadful, terrible, and five other adjectives in my dictionary—but it certainly doesn't mean nasty. The English title therefore misleads. This story, fictional but based on fact, is about Sonja, born and brought up in a Bavarian town, who wins a national contest for high school students with an essay on some bland subject, then for another contest decides to write an essay on what happened in her town during the years 1939-1945. She isn't nasty, she is frightful, fearful, dreadful, terrible, etc.

At first, with chuckles and patronizing pats, officials shunt her off or feed her patent bunk. This only heats her zeal to uncover the truth. The search and research go on for some years, during which she marries and has two children, during which also she runs into more and more violent opposition from the town. Some of the results are rocks through her windows and the burning of her home.

She persists. She sues the town for the right of access to secret files, wins, writes her book (as it has become), and publishes it. After she receives awards in several foreign countries, her town honors her. Then she starts work on her next book, which will be about the fate of the Jews in her town during the Nazi years. Again—opposition.

Lena Stolze plays Sonja. In 1981 Stolze made her debut in Verhoeven's *The White Rose*, a film (based on fact) about the Munich students who spread anti-Nazi propaganda in 1942, were caught, and decapitated. Stolze played a leader of the small group, and as long as I breathe, I won't forget the last scene in her cell, a sunny morning in which she simply stands looking at the sky before she is led away to execution.

Here Verhoeven has Stolze play Sonja rather friskily, not a grim fighter for truth but a fairly ordinary girl, then a woman, who gets involved in a subject dealing with the town she loves and who, more like a stubborn child than a heroine, just won't be put off. This approach, along with the techniques noted earlier, makes *The Nasty Girl* an odd hybrid—light-fingered Sacha Guitry storytelling applied to some of the most somber materials of the century. The disjuncture keeps us somewhat distant from a film that, we sense, ought to be making us feel more. It's fine that Verhoeven wanted to avoid the sententious, but he has done it at the price of achieving the serious.

### ***Journey of Hope*, Xavier Koller (*New Republic*, 13 May 1991)**

Sometimes an exception doesn't prove the rule, it demonstrates a different rule. Generally, it's true, I'd hold, that good acting has a double texture: the performance plus our simultaneous awareness that a good actor is creating the performance. The presence and ability of Christopher Walken, the man himself, are part of his accomplished acting in *The Comfort of Strangers*, for example.

But there is another kind of good acting in which, though we are aware of its excellence all along, the persona of the actor seems ingested in the work. Here the erasure of virtuosity—while being a virtuoso—is an aesthetic imperative. Such a



performance was Max von Sydow's in *Pelle the Conqueror*. Such is the performance by the Turkish actor Necmettin Çobanoğlu in *Journey of Hope*.

This is the picture that won the Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film at the recent Academy Awards. It had been seen by relatively few, and when the winner was announced, the title was greeted by near silence, spattered with minimal polite applause. The audience favorite, I suppose, was *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Now *Journey of Hope* can be widely seen, and odd though it is to agree with an Academy Award, I think it a far better film than *Cyrano*. Past that weak criterion, it's a fine work in itself.

The screenplay, based on fact, is by Xavier Koller, a Swiss writer-director, and Feride Çiçekoğlu, a woman, who is a Turkish screenwriter. A present-day Turkish farmer immigrates to Switzerland with his wife and small son—one of their seven children. They have been having a rough time of it and have heard that Switzerland is the land of milk and chocolate. Grandparents take care of the other children, and after selling all of the little they have for capital, the parents set out with one child. They don't have all the necessary papers, but they are determined.

The picture chronicles their journey, their courage, naïveté, and strength in the hands of the friendly or callous or thieving people they meet—in Istanbul, in Italy, in the snowy Alpine passes through which they try to slip into Switzerland. Of drama in any conventionally developed sense, there is none. Except for some human-comedy touches in Italy—and even these may be factual—the whole takes on the quality of a documentary, gripping us with its actuality, amazing us that a camera could have been present all the while this was “actually” happening.

That peculiar amazement grows out of the three major performances, most certainly that of Çobanoğlu as the farmer. Hollow-cheeked, burning-eyed, small-chinned, unshaven—and stiffly proud—he makes the farmer a man so steeped in his own being, so authentic in his persistence and devotion, that there is no room for the histrion. When we remember the details of the film process—the cues, the waiting, the retakes, etc., etc.—the unflecked verity in Çobanoğlu's performance is all the more overwhelming. The sequences in which he struggles through a nighttime mountain blizzard carrying his son are almost biblical in their stark, unadorned stature. His very last scene in the film is a silent poem of grief.

Nur Sürer, as his wife, is of the same caliber. She has somewhat less to contribute, but it is all done in the same vein of total selfless subscription to this person, to this journey. The boy, Emin Sivas, is absolutely free of child-actorishness. Something cultural, even genetic, seems to have taken over with him. He understands that he is a member of a family—in several senses.

The title produces a slight resistance beforehand, an opposition to heart-tug. This takes about twenty seconds to disappear. It becomes quickly apparent that Koller is a director of true seriousness and commitment, with skill and taste. The cinematographer, Elemér Ragalyi, is first class. He is Hungarian (he shot Janos Rozsa's *Love, Mother*) and has also worked extensively abroad. This is the best work of his that I've seen; it proves yet again that cinematographers, like actors, need occasions to which they can rise. Ragalyi's work here is like Çobanoğlu's, beautiful without any intrusive pride in that fact.

In an age that has had millions of refugees and emigrants—the Kurds are only the latest victims—*Journey of Hope*, small in scale, sees the world in Blake's grain of sand.

***Where Angels Fear to Tread*, by Charles Sturridge (*New Republic*, 16 March 1992)**

To some nineteenth-century Anglophone writers, the romantic land of passion and trial was Italy. Hawthorne, Browning, and James are among those who thought that the mores and the emotional depths of their cultures were put to the test in Italy. For us, Italy may have become the source of Armani and high cuisine, but for them, it was a furnace where primal flame burned through figurative and sometimes literal corsets.

No twentieth-century writer more fully subscribed to that view than E. M. Forster, a fact emphasized by the film just made from *Where Angels Fear To Tread*. This novel, Forster's first (1905), is almost diagrammatic in its contrastings of England and Italy, of upper-middle-class English decorum and indecorous, unbuttoned Italians; and the screenplay, by Tim Sullivan and Derek Granger and Charles Sturridge (who directed), is faithful to this scheme.

But once again, in the adapting of novels to films, fidelity is not necessarily helpful. The basic trouble here, to put it elementarily, is that a film is not a novel. The quintessence of Forster's method is that his story progresses from propriety to melodrama—ending in a baby-stealing episode that is right out of mid-Victorian theater—and that he tells it all in a calm, wry, shrewdly observant manner. The tone contrasts comically and sometimes poignantly with the tale. It's as if the contrast between Italy and England within the story were mirrored in the contrast between the story and the voice of the narrator.

Now this contrast, between story and narrative tone, is precisely what the film does not capture—probably no film could. Sturridge directed *A Handful of Dust* and came respectably near the Waugh texture, but this was in some degree easier because the tone of Waugh's dialogue is fairly close to the tone of the book as a whole. If the actors merely speak Waugh's lines, they achieve at least something of the flavor of Waugh's novel. This is not true of Forster's book. Forster doesn't envy his characters, as Waugh does: he reveals them. Plucked from their context, they leave the novel far behind, especially that essential contrast between them and their prose environment.

Sturridge makes it worse. The story's initial situation is complicated, and the screenplay doesn't clarify it quickly. Lilia (played by Helen Mirren) is a widow, close to her ex-mother-in-law, Mrs. Herriton (Barbara Jefford), and the Herriton children (Rupert Graves and Judy Davis). Lilia, leaving her own small daughter with Mrs. Herriton, visits Italy with a friend, Caroline (Helena Bonham Carter). It takes too long to understand Lilia's relationship to the Herritons, and the film never clarifies who Caroline is. More: some of the dialogue is spoken incomprehensibly—Sturridge knows it so well that he hasn't always been able to tell when it is mumbled—so this picture has its share of murk. Michael Coulter's camera seems commissioned to underscore the murk with a dark palette, in England and abroad.

When Lilia sends word of her engagement to a young Italian in the Tuscan town where she is staying, Mrs. Herriton dispatches her son to rescue her from Italian wiles. Too late. Lilia is already married. Subsequently, after Lilia dies in childbirth, Mrs. Herriton sends both son and daughter to get the child and bring it back for a proper English upbringing—something Caroline also wants to do. The climax, an unhappy accident, is treated by Forster with tact and by Sturridge with clumsiness.

That excellent actress Judy Davis unwittingly highlights the difficulty of filming this book. Her role, the frustrated, frightened, imperious Harriet Herriton, is

written full out by Forster. “Snarling,” “screamed,” “violent” are some of the terms he uses about Harriet, and Davis fulfills them. But that’s exactly what’s wrong. In the novel Harriet’s screaming is contained within its Forsterian ambience; in the film, without the ambience, the screaming seems out of scale. It’s not Davis’s fault: she is doing what Forster says. But he didn’t write Harriet’s words to be spoken aloud, bereft of their prose context.

Graves, who was in *A Handful of Dust*, does much better as her brother, conveying the melting of adenoidal northern stuffiness by Italian warmth, but his role is much more congenially transportable from page to screen. Bonham Carter is chiefly successful at defining the class to which Caroline belongs and which means so much to her. Giovanni Guidelli, as Lilia’s husband, hardly seems the best choice among young Italian actors to suggest a blend of charm, sex, innocence, and guile.

***The Ear*, by Karel Kachyna (*New Republic*, 27 April 1992)**

Vaclav Havel wrote recently:

The return of freedom to a place that became morally unhinged has produced something that it clearly had to produce, and therefore something we might have expected. But it has turned out to be far more serious than anyone could have predicted: an enormous and blindingly visible explosion of every imaginable human vice.

We read these words in the West and think we understand them. But how can we plumb the bitterness—the foreseen bitterness, says Havel—that people in the newly liberated East must feel? Particularly if, like Havel and other Czech, Polish, Hungarian playwrights and filmmakers, they created artworks about oppression under communism and the hunger for freedom.

Here is a pinch of salt to rub in the wound—*The Ear*, a Czech film that was made in 1970, was banned until quite recently, and is now given its New York theatrical premiere at New York’s Film Forum. *The Ear* was written by Karel Kachyna, who directed, and Jan Prochazka, long-term collaborators who have been compared as a team to De Sica-Zavattini and Carné-Prévert. *The Ear* was the Czech pair’s last joint work. Prochazka, says Josef Skvorecky, became a main target of governmental persecution because of the bugging of a friend’s house, which provided the police with a frank record of Prochazka’s views. All that saved him from prison was illness and, in 1971, death. (Kachyna survived professionally by turning to children’s films.) The bugging that undid Prochazka seems especially grim because bugging and political fright are the subjects of *The Ear*.

A high-ranking Prague official and his wife return, somewhat the worse for champagne and vodka, to their fairly *luxe* home after a state party at which they heard some cryptic remarks. They find their doors unlocked and the electricity off. The husband is convinced that he is a marked man; he and his wife have a series of late-night quarrels about this and other such matters even after the electricity is mysteriously restored. Then comes an early-morning visit by a group of political revelers on their way home from that same party; they carouse, overweeningly, then leave. The husband and wife are now convinced that this visit was part of a scheme to incriminate him. They discover a number of electronic bugs scattered through their house. Shortly after dawn the telephone rings. News arrives that puts a cynical twist

on everything that we have seen and heard.

The compressed, patterned form of the screenplay—it's a two-character drama, except for the revelers' brief interruption—is a bit too neat. We are almost as conscious of the script-tailoring, the arrangements of incidents like a morality play, as we are of the chilling theme. But Kachyna directs it intensely, almost expressionistically. His usual cinematographer, Josef Illik, gives most of the faces the ghastly naturalism of tabloid-newspaper photos. The performances by Radoslav Brzobahaty and Jirina Bohdalova are vivid, especially Bohdalova's. She portrays a woman confined by strictures who burrows into private domains, some of them petty, to find compensation.

About the courage of all the people involved in the making of this film in 1970, praise from the comfy West would verge on the obscene. And now after twenty years of suppression, *The Ear* is released into the Czechoslovakia whose president describes his country as above. I wonder if Havel—surely the finest spirit in public life since Pope John XXIII—has seen *The Ear* and, if so, what he thinks of it today.

Well, perhaps he told us, further along in the same article:

The former regime systematically mobilized the worst human qualities, like selfishness, envy, and hatred. This was far from merely being something we deserved: it was, at the same time, responsible for the way we became.

***The Last Days of Chez Nous*, by Gillian Armstrong (*New Republic*, 29 March 1993)**

A prime concept in feminist film criticism is the “male gaze,” essentially the idea that “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.” Much of this argument seems to me enlightening and just, so I felt particularly guilty of male gazing at *The Last Days of Chez Nous*. The guilt was particular because this film was written, designed, directed, and produced by women.

The feminist critique postulates that, throughout film history, films have been shaped by male desires and fears; yet what I'll chiefly remember from this film made by women are the faces of the women I was given to look at for ninety-six minutes. Not so much their faces as actors, as one might look at the beautiful Vanessa Redgrave or Anjelica Huston. The women in *Chez Nous* are talented enough, but the film's chief pleasure for me was in looking at them simply as a male, indulging in the fantasies that are, and are seemingly meant to be, inevitable.

Yet this feast was presented to me by female filmmakers. Were they still trapped within the “structured film form”? Or was I seeing a refusal by these filmmakers to truckle to male expectation of feminist filmmaking? An implication that they would use female qualities as they damned well chose to use them? In any case I luxuriated in sultanic-aesthetic bliss while watching the picture. It's Australian, set mainly in Sydney with a considerable section in the Outback. The *chez* that is *nous* includes Lisa Harrow as a writer of publishable novels, Kerry Fox as her unmarried sister, Miranda Otto as Harrow's teenaged daughter, and Bruno Ganz as Harrow's husband, though not her daughter's father. (The man is French, and Ganz bravely essays the accent.)

Helen Garner's screenplay opts for the novelistic approach. What this means, in barbarously simple terms, is that Garner lets characters simmer and lets the action develop from this simmering rather than, as prescribed by Aristotle, beginning with

action, which then develops the characters. The novelistic approach has bred many fine films (Éric Rohmer's are key examples); indeed this film is more interesting in the early parts when characters are only simmering, before the quite predictable action begins.

Harrow and Ganz are not getting on very well. She loves him and tells him so; his love is waning, and he invents reasons to justify the change. She asks too many questions, she cuts a brie before it is ripe, she invents conversations to no purpose—all the sorts of irritations that are only surface symptoms of deeper clutter. She teases him about an affair he may be having with a girl. He teases her—perhaps it's not teasing—by admitting it.

Fox, the sister, comes back from some time in Italy at the start of the picture—the first sound we hear is the scraping of the wheels on her suitcase—and subsequently informs Harrow that she is pregnant. Harrow persuades her to have an abortion; Fox complies but is emotionally shaken by the operation, before and after. Harrow then goes on a two-week auto trip with her aging father, out in the Australian desert, bleak but grand in its vastness. She and her father have never gotten along well, and she wants to make some conciliatory moves before it's too late. This trip, as might have been foretold, has dubious results.

As might also have been foretold, Fox and Ganz fuse while Harrow is away. (As a light counterpoint to this involvement, Harrow's daughter and a young boarder in their house are having their own fandango.) When the wife returns, she soon scents the change. Ganz then explodes as if it were her fault, as if she were insufficiently understanding. He leaves with Fox. At the end, Harrow, alone, rises from her front porch and moves off toward the city in search of . . . something.

Nothing is resolved in the film—the ending, or how long Fox and Ganz will stay together, or anything else—and this is all to the good. The story's plot interferes with the film's best asset: its treatment of daily lives. But plot or no plot, what's astonishing in this film about two women and a man is that the man's wishes, complaints, dissatisfactions are taken as the crux. Both sisters and even Harrow's daughter treat Ganz as legislator. His pleasures and displeasures are accepted—not always meekly but nonetheless accepted. His wishes are to be gratified.

None of this is presented as even vaguely satiric; there's not the slightest hint that women's subservience, however stormy, is in question. The screenplay could have used a denser texture, some theme below the engaging dailiness, but more notable than that lack is a presence—that of the rooster-among-clucking-hens syndrome.

The director was Gillian Armstrong, who made an international splash in 1979 with *My Brilliant Career*, the film that also brought to the world the acting of Judy Davis and the cinematography of Don McAlpine. Among the films that Armstrong has made since then were the mildly appealing *High Tide* and, in America, the quite unappealing *Mrs. Soffel*. She has had a bumpy career, and *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, though plainly the work of a talent, may not smooth it.

Her cinematographer this time is Geoffrey Simpson, who works in slabs of color: one sequence is gray blue, the next dull red, and so on. This is attractive for a while but then seems to be pointless—arbitrary rather than schematic. The single best shot is of a lighted telephone booth in the Outback, seen against a huge late-twilight sky, but that shot seems suggested by a closing moment in Antonioni's *The Passenger*.

At last, as at first, there's the basic paradox for the male viewer, more basic

than the phallocentrism of the story itself. Armstrong presents a screenful of lovely faces, Harrow's, Fox's, Otto's—especially Harrow's, with its combination of beauty and comprehended experience. I'm not arguing for homeliness, though talented non-beauties certainly exist, nor against the rightful place of sexuality in film and theater. (Besides, in a film about the tidal motions of sex, how could they use actors who are not engaging as sexual agents?) I don't in fact argue anything: I wonder. So much loveliness, so many irresistible occasions for male gazing. Couldn't these women filmmakers have chosen at least one woman who was just a mite less lovely?

***Forrest Gump*, by Robert Zemeckis (*New Republic*, 8 August 1994)**

A surprising number of films have mentally subnormal people as protagonists, but I know of only two in which such a protagonist is seen as a sage or savior. *Being There*, adapted from Jerzy Kosinski's novel, took its odd hero right up to the brink of a presidential nomination. Now comes *Forrest Gump*. Made from a novel by Winston Groom, this film follows an Alabaman man with an I.Q. of seventy-five from his schoolboy difficulties through action in Vietnam to postwar wealth and esteem.

Heaven, which presumably gave Forrest his I.Q., also has a hand in his success—and a sense of humor, too. He can run fast so, when he's a youth, a university calls him and he becomes an All-American footballer. In the army he gets fascinated with Ping-Pong and becomes a champion. After the war he goes into the shrimping business and flops. Then a storm destroys all the competitive shrimping boats roundabout, and Forrest cashes in.

Someone suggests an investment in what Forrest thinks is a fruit business: he likes fruit, so he invests. What he thought was fruit turns out to be Apple computers. At one point, for various reasons, he decides to run back and forth across the U.S.A. for a couple of years. Instead of being regarded as eccentric, he is hailed as a guru and has a band of faithful disciples running behind him. And (thanks to computer graphics) he also has cheery meetings with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Kosinski's hero was a TV-anesthetized subaverage man intended as a satirical comment on a society force-fed with mass culture and manipulated responses. Groom's Forrest is just a boy-man on whom Heaven is smiling—and we're supposed to smile, too, at Heaven's neatness. Heaven's involvement is italicized at the beginning by the descent of a bird's white feather to Forrest's feet and at the end by that feather's skyward rise.

Between the two authors, I'll take Kosinski. Basically Groom is saying, "Who needs intelligence? Keep your heart pure and Heaven will provide. What's more, you'll get a few laughs, and you'll end up rich." Not only rich but the father of a charming child, the result of your only sexual congress, with a woman whom you've adored since you were schoolmates. She has been through a series of moral travails that are a kind of moral analogue of your physical-financial adventures, and after she turns over your child to you, she is considerate enough to die and get out of the way.

I can't see how people with low I.Q.s or those who love them are in any way comforted by all this hogwash. I can easily see how such people might be offended by its smug unreality.

Tom Hanks plays Forrest Gump, apparently because he wanted a role that would be as far off the beaten track as the one in his last picture, *Philadelphia*. Hanks is exceptionally gifted, and he plays Forrest well enough; but the role doesn't call for anything like the variety and resource that Debra Winger needed—and had—for her

comparable role in *A Dangerous Woman*.

Robin Wright is acceptable as the woman who winds in and out of Forrest's life. The best performance comes from Gary Sinise, sinewy and vitriolic, as the lieutenant whom Forrest meets in Vietnam and who later joins him on the shrimp boat. Robert Zemeckis directed Eric Roth's adequately carpentered screenplay with undistinguished competence.

***Flirting with Disaster*, by David O. Russell (*New Republic*, 22 April 1996)**

Joy to the world. A talent is confirmed. Two years ago David O. Russell made his first film, *Spanking the Monkey*, which handled a difficult subject, incest, with finesse, even humor—a promising début. The promise is kept. *Flirting with Disaster* is even better, a comedy that surfs from beginning to end on a wave of high spirits. The tone is young but not juvenile, sexy but not cynical, optimistic but not stupid. One of the most difficult jobs in filmmaking, considering the long and varied patches of time over which filming is done, is to sustain bounce, energy, brio. I can't remember anything since early Philippe de Broca (*The Joker*), over thirty years ago, that bubbles more consistently than Russell's new film.

What's it about? Well, the excuse for its action is the search of a young man, Ben Stiller, who was adopted as a baby, for his biological parents. (A slight mirror image of Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite*, which is mere gagster's cookery compared with Russell's *soufflé*.) He and his wife, Patricia Arquette, both entomologists at the New York Museum of Natural History, set out for California with their infant son, accompanied by a graduate student in psychology—female—who got the necessary information for them from an adoption agency and wants to observe the reunion for research purposes.

Not a spectacularly inviting premise, but the plot turns out to be less important to the whole than the plot of a Donizetti comic opera. It's an excuse, an armature, on which the creator can create what matters: the texture. From the very opening sequence, in which Stiller tells the psychologist, Tea Leoni, how he wonders whether every middle-aged person he passes might be his father or mother, we know we are being carried by deft and naughty fingers.

The search for Stiller's parents turns out to involve three locations. The first is southern California, at its most tawny and sun-besotted, the Circe of climates. The second is the snowy Midwest, involving truck drivers and federal agents. The third is the New Mexico desert, where the searchers meet a weird couple, Alan Alda and Lily Tomlin, and their ominous son, Glenn Fitzgerald. Russell seizes every chance along the way to laugh at contemporary vogues and pretenses, to revel in the quandaries brought about by sexual liberation. In essence, this is a sex comedy, which is remarkable considering that almost no sex is actually seen.

Russell's first success here is in his casting. Stiller, though he nods a bit too much as a sign that he knows what's going on and is considering his response, radiates friendliness and fun. Arquette provides just the right warm, young-mother presence, and Leoni, with a perfect figure, is a perfect counterfoil. Mary Tyler Moore and George Segal are Stiller's adoptive parents, loving liberal Jewish New Yorkers who appear and reappear at the precise moments dictated by the rigors of farce. Alda and Tomlin supply their professional selves. Richard Jenkins and Josh Brolin are the two feds who keep revealing more and more of their complexities.

The cast list alone suggests that Russell has zoomed high in Budget-land

(although the cast of his \$80,000 début film was exceptionally good). The credits, involving every kind of technician and assistant, roll on for many minutes at the end as if to confirm Big Bucks. But, with the exception of one quite superfluous helicopter shot, Russell is not out to spend: he concentrates seriously on levity.

Let's not overlook the fact that he wrote his own script—and wrote it brightly. He might well have altered a scene in which Arquette sits on the toilet, and he could have left out some high-school jokes about the New Mexico family's name; but the dialogue is generally neat and sharp. Just one sample: when one of the feds begins to get high on LSD (I won't explain why), someone asks him how he feels. He says: "Vivid."

This is the second time, so early in the year, that a second film has confirmed the talent of an American director. Philip Haas, a quite different temperament, followed his haunting *Music of Chance* with the rich and disturbing *Angels and Insects*. Now Russell. Quite apart from the qualities of these two artists, it's cheering to see such a phenomenon in a film age that seems to bluntly oppose it.

### ***Ponette*, by Jacques Doillon (*New Republic*, 2 June 1997)**

Here's the oddest bit of press-kit bio I've ever read; it's about the leading performer in a new French film: "Victoire Thivisol's performance in this film rightfully earned her the Best Actress Award at the 1996 Venice Film Festival. She is currently attending kindergarten in France." The film is *Ponette*. Victoire was tapped for the title role when she was three and a half and finished the film when she was four. (I can't call her Thivisol, as one might say Moreau or Deneuve, even though she is already a prize-winning actress.)

In the matter of child acting, this is the most extraordinary picture I know. The French have a long history of exceptional work with children—*La Maternelle* (1932), by Jean Benoît-Lévy, and *Forbidden Games* (1952), by René Clément, are only two of the antecedents—but no film, French or otherwise, that I know has given a large leading role to a child so young and has surrounded her, mostly, with children of about the same age.

The author-director was Jacques Doillon, now in his fifties, who has made over fifteen films, none of which I have seen. Quite apart from the specifics of *Ponette*, he is obviously a skilled man in general, adept at the governance of space. He uses just enough in every composition to include context without losing concentration on his subject.

This quality is what makes the film begin so alluringly. The first shot is a close-up of a young man talking to his small daughter, Ponette, who is in a hospital bed. We learn that there has been a car wreck. Ponette's arm was broken, and the man's wife, the child's mother, is in a very bad way. As the scene ends, we expect, film-conditioned as we are, that we will follow the father into adult travails. But he leaves, and we stay with Ponette, close up.

And the whole film stays with Ponette, as she struggles to understand what death is, what it means in relation to herself and her mother (who soon dies) and to the rest of her life. The picture is too long, too crammed with the games and fabrications and quarrels of Ponette and her coevals, too laden with adult sagacities about heaven and God, and it's suddenly adorned with a miracle that we are clearly expected to accept as a miracle because of a red sweater—the tangible residue of a mysterious visitation. The wonder of this film is not the story but the making of it.



This means: how did Doillon deal with Victoire? All small children fantasize. But how, after much testing of pre-school children, did Doillon decide on Victoire? And how do you get a four-year-old who lives in daily contact with her mother to pretend convincingly that her mother is dead? Acting talent seems a quite unrelated subject for a child so very young; it seems too early even for the ego-satisfaction that children get from good imitations when they're five or six. I note, however, that in the list of credits, along with the scene shifter and the costume designer, is a children's psychoanalyst.

I don't impute exploitation to Doillon—anyway, not any more than obtains when any child is put in a hothouse relationship with adults for a limited time, then dropped. (Remember that lovely little boy who was Dustin Hoffman's son in *Kramer vs. Kramer*? I wonder what he's doing now.) I do impute to Doillon some special powers of perception and empathy—to help Victoire over the threshold from play into playing, into the use of the life she is just beginning to know. (I leave out Doillon's power of persuasion with Victoire's actual parents.)

*Ponette* sets a new world record for juvenility in a leading performer. Will someone try to break that record?

***Washington Square*, by Agnieszka Holland (New Republic, 20 October 1997)**

In November of 1880 William James read two new novels by his brother Henry, one of which was *Washington Square*, and sent him a congratulatory letter. Henry replied:

Thank you for what you say about my two novels. The young man in *Washington Square* is not a portrait—he is sketched from the outside merely & not *fouille*. The only good thing in the story is the girl.

Too modest, many of us might say. Few would put this novel in the first James rank, but the young man is sufficiently explored to make him entirely credible, and Dr. Sloper, the girl's father, has fascinations. His complexities, his modes of wreaking vengeance on his daughter because her birth caused the death of his beloved wife, have a range that includes the sexual. (A slight reminder here of the relationship between Elizabeth Barrett and her father.)

Some suggestion of the sensual touched Ralph Richardson's performance of Dr. Sloper in the William Wyler film (1949). That screenplay was by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, who derived it from their dramatization of the book for the theater (it was revived successfully last year on Broadway). Their version gave the story a vindictive conclusion. Wyler's film, like the Goetz play, was called *The Heiress*, and the jilted heiress had a biter-bit last scene in which, after some years, the jilter was jilted.

Now the novel is filmed again, is called *Washington Square*, and the Goetz version is not in evidence. In this screenplay by Carol Doyle, the tyrannical rich father is again, through his wealth, successful in dissuading his daughter's suitor, but the ending is much closer to James. (Despite a sugary touch with a child.) Catherine Sloper wreaks no vengeance; she simply dismisses the returned Morris Townsend. She has become the queen of her self, of her pride, in a way that her now-deceased father might not have imagined.

But, despite its more Jamesian conclusion, this new film flounders. First, the

casting. Jennifer Jason Leigh, as Catherine, is a reclusive, damaged, tight-lipped worrier, with no hint in her of thwarted possibilities for fullness. In Wyler's film Olivia de Havilland was a prisoner; Leigh is a neurotic. Ben Chaplin, as Morris, may have been chosen because he has a vague resemblance to Montgomery Clift, Wyler's Morris; but Chaplin has no hint of Clift's temperament or depth. Morris needs to convince us of his genuine feeling for Catherine, despite the genuineness of his need for her wealth. Chaplin is simply around a lot in the film, with not much power.

The gifted Maggie Smith plays Catherine's aunt, but the colorful Smith is straitjacketed in this doting-aunt role. The biggest disappointment, because of high hopes for him, is Albert Finney as Dr. Sloper. Most of what he does here seems first-take acting—though it may have been twentieth-take or more. Finney curls his lines in the air like a slave-driver's whip, but the whole part is, as theater lingo has it, indicated. Nothing that Finney says or does comes from a realized man.

The cinematographer was Jerzy Zielinski, who manages to frame compositions without planes or emphasis. Except for the two-shots and close-ups, we frequently see frames in which there is little distinction between the flowers on the table, the pictures on the wall, the curtains on the windows, and the characters in the scene. Yes, domestic clutter was a sign of the *bon ton* of the time, but to include the characters in the clutter doesn't much help the drama. And Zielinski's colors would be the envy of any postcard manufacturer.

The director was the Polish-born, Czech-trained Agnieszka Holland, who has won some renown for *Europa, Europa* and a few other films. If in the past her work sometimes seemed overbearing, here it seems ill at ease, uncomfortable, straining for effect. She falls back on the sorriest of clichés. Is there a scene between the two lovers in a park near a fountain? Then we must have at least one shot of the lovers seen through the fountain spray. Does Morris abandon Catherine and drive off, with her running after the carriage through the muddy street? Then of course Catherine must trip and fall headlong in the mud. And of course Holland is ultimately responsible for the general superficiality of the acting throughout.

*Washington Square* doesn't begin to answer the question that attends all remakes: Why?

### ***Wilde*, by Brian Gilbert (*New Republic*, 18 May 1998)**

In 1960, two films about Oscar Wilde were released in the United States. Reviewing them together, I said:

Wilde was pilloried because of acts that, if they had been heterosexual, would have elicited about equal parts of conventional shock and envy. What was on trial here, essentially, was a person's right to be homosexual. It was simply too early in the calendar of social progress for Wilde to claim that right.

I dig this up to underscore how rapidly that calendar has flipped along since 1960, let alone since Wilde's day. Nowadays, partly because of that calendar change, there is a resurgence of interest in Wilde.

Not in Wilde's work so much as in the man. The work, though not always prominent, has never been obscured. (For a time it seemed that resident theaters in America couldn't get grants unless they did *The Importance of Being Earnest*.) Greatly enlarged sexual freedom has transformed Wilde, in the light of today's

acceptance, from an outstanding victim into something of a tragic hero.

Last season there was an Off-Broadway play about the Wilde trials. Very recently Liam Neeson opened as Wilde in a London play that is headed for Broadway. And here is *Wilde*—a British film, of course—in which he is seen as a proponent of a sexual view that, aesthetically and morally, was far in advance of his time, a view now so widely accepted that the audience can feel it is peering back into the Middle Ages. Among the signs of this great change are the scenes of homosexual intimacy, which would have been impossible in those 1960 films.

First, let's look at the most important element. Wilde stands or falls, primarily, on the performance of the title role, and Stephen Fry is splendid. I've seen three other Wildes, Robert Morley and Peter Finch in those two earlier films and Michéal MacLiammóir in a one-man show. All had admirable qualities, but Fry surpasses them. He is celebrated in British theater, television, and film as actor and writer. (He also writes novels. One of them, *Making History*, has just been published in the U.S.) Americans may remember him as the host in a country-weekend film called *Peter's Friends*, or as Jeeves in the PBS "Jeeves and Wooster." He was urbane there, and of course he is urbane here, but he also has dignity and depth to justify Wilde's self-esteem. And the physical resemblance convinces. (Wilde didn't become really plump until after his release from prison.)

A word about Fry's voice. It is full without a trace of plumminess, a "normal" speaking voice yet with an always available richness just below it. His first three words in the film are "How very kind," and when I heard the word "kind" dropped in, differently resonant, after the first two words, I suspected that this performance was going to be a treat. Which it is.

The opening credits are bordered with Aubrey Beardsley drawings, a clever little deceit because the opening shot sweeps us into the American West, galloping horses and all. Wilde is in Leadville, Colorado, in 1882. The screenplay doesn't explain that he was on an American lecture tour, but it does let him descend into a silver mine where, elegantly dressed and spoken, he makes friends with the miners.

Then we're in London, with Wilde marrying. The rest of the film could be called the results of that marriage. Julian Mitchell's screenplay, drawn from the definitive biography by Richard Ellmann, deals justly with the marriage. Wilde loves his wife, a generous and patient woman, and loves his two sons. (The family scenes are linked by Wilde's reading of "The Selfish Giant," one of the tales he invented for his children.) But these loves were not all of him, not even the major part, as he fairly soon found out through a young friend named Robert Ross, whom he also loves. Then came Bosie—Lord Alfred Douglas, the young beauty who enraptured and tortured Wilde and led him into the underworld of gay life. And then came Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, who tried to rescue his son from Wilde's clutches when in fact most of the clutching was the other way around.

It's generally thought that Queensberry was a crude philistine, a huntin'-shootin' brute with no trace of intellect or sensitivity; but, precisely because this film doesn't attempt to mitigate matters, we can see him in an additional light. Consider the period. How many fathers of the 1890s, even cultivated ones, would not have tried—as they saw it then—to rescue their sons from homosexual depravity? Queensberry today might be a case for treatment. In his own day he seems a coarse instance of a general opinion.

Mitchell indeed gives Queensberry, with Wilde, one of the most telling scenes in the picture. Bosie insists on introducing his father to Wilde at the Café Royal and

leaves them to lunch together. Mitchell has devised the dialogue, for a meeting only briefly described by Ellmann, with insight and grace. Wilde is so subtle that Queensberry later tells Bosie that he thought Wilde charming. But the relationship still revolts the Marquess, and he leaves that notorious provocative card at Wilde's club. Wilde, against any need or sense, insists on suing for libel.

Queensberry is acquitted and, as a result of matters he adduced in his defense, Wilde is arrested. After two trials—the first jury disagreed—Wilde was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for his sexual behavior. (In *De Profundis*, the immense letter he wrote to Bosie from prison, he indicts the younger man for persuading him to bring the first legal action. I still believe, as I wrote in 1960, that "Wilde, who for all his bohemianism was an Irish Victorian of strong religious bent, willed his own punishment." Somewhere deep in him was a wish to be discovered and chastised.) Wilde comes out of prison determined not to see Bosie again. The film ends with their re-meeting. Omitted are the three years before his death in Paris in 1900, three somewhat desperately bacchanalian years.

Brian Gilbert, who directed a film about T. S. Eliot and his wife called *Tom and Viv*, has treated this Wilde film with delicacy and perception. The cast is flawless. Jennifer Ehle (daughter of Rosemary Harris) gives substance to Constance Wilde. Michael Sheen, as Robert Ross, is a loyal Horatio to his harried prince. Jude Law is the ideal Bosie, a male beauty, high-spirited, vicious, appealing. In her few brief scenes as Wilde's mother, Vanessa Redgrave does what she can. The surprising, unsettling performance is by Tom Wilkinson, last seen in *The Full Monty*. He plays Queensberry with such abrasive authenticity that he becomes something more than a stock stupid boor.

For those who know Ellmann's biography, this film has nothing factually new. (It does have, besides condensation, some changes. For instance, it was not Ada Leverson who met Wilde when he came out the prison gate.) But a biographical film's function is not necessarily new material, it is embodiment. Aided by every cinematic resource, including Nic Ede's almost palpable costumes, *Wilde* succeeds.

## Theater

### *The Deputy*, by Rolf Hochhuth (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, May 1965)

The subject of the German mass-murder of the Jews is treated in the most controversial work of recent years. *The Deputy*, a long play by Rolf Hochhuth, a young German, is his first published work and has aroused fervent protest and praise in the many cities in Europe, as well as in New York, where necessarily truncated versions have been produced. So intense have been both the attacks and defenses that some modest clarification is in order before questions of judgment arise.

Most importantly, the play is not about Pope Pius XII. International uproar has so centered on the one scene in which the Pope appears, for quite understandable reasons, that it has put the drama out of focus. But this is more than academic nicety, it is germane to the consideration of *The Deputy* that this elementary fact be underscored: the play is about a young Italian Jesuit named Fontana and his road to martyrdom, on which road an encounter with Pius XII is a major factor. The theme of the play is not the personal or official guilt of Pius, any more than the theme of Shaw's *Saint Joan* is the guilt or innocence of her judges. The work is concerned with an ancient phenomenon common to most religions: the communicant who takes his beliefs too seriously for the comfort, security, and operation of his religious organization. Before the Roman Catholic Church can canonize a Joan, they burn her to be rid of her troublesomeness. Tolstoy was excommunicated by the Greek Orthodox Church for what was, in their view, excessive Christianity.

In *The Deputy*, Father Fontana discovers in Berlin in 1942 that Germans are murdering Jews daily by the thousands. (He learns this from an actual historical personage whom Hochhuth uses—Kurt Gerstein, a Protestant, who joined the SS in order to investigate the death camps and who eventually was reported a suicide but was probably killed.) Father Fontana, son of a high Vatican counselor, carries the news to his father and to a cardinal who is a friend of the family. He is taken to the Pope himself, and in a long scene implores the pontiff to cry out in a worldwide voice against these crimes. The Pope declines, on several grounds: Hitler is engaged in a war against communism; a papal pronouncement might spur the Germans to intensify Jewish murders; the Church's ancient role is mediation and neutrality. All the Pope feels he can do is to issue a general denunciation of bloodshed. The young Jesuit, horror-stricken by the refusal of Christ's vicar to speak in Christ's name directly against immense barbarity, declares that God shall not destroy his church because a pope shrinks from his summons. He makes his way back to Germany and joins some Jews being sent to Auschwitz. There is a long, dramatically complicated scene at Auschwitz involving the cynical camp doctor, Gerstein, Fontana, a Jewish escapee, and others. It ends, inevitably, with Fontana's death.

Additional scenes through the play show us Eichmann and high Nazis in morbid private amusements and confabulations; show further Nazi harassment and persecution of Jews. But what we have here is, as noted, a play not about Pius XII but about a young priest who discovers the most enormous crime in the history of Christian civilization—most enormous not only by its size but because it is happening one thousand, nine hundred and forty years after Christ's incarnation and crucifixion were supposed to have had an effect on human conduct. When the priest's highest earthly superior refuses to stand publicly against that crime, the priest himself joins

the victims. “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” becomes for Father Fontana, “My church, my church, why hast thou forsaken my God?” assuming that his church, in its highest actions, is personified by the pope. That is one of the meanings of the title.

Such is the titanic theme of Hochhuth’s work. In execution it falls considerably short of encompassing its aims. Its structure is lumpy, its characterizations generally thin (although verbose), its conclusions murkily symbolic and complicated. The dialogue, in Richard and Clara Winston’s translation (published by Grove Press, 352 pp.), is heavy and does not achieve the poetic, although the lines are broken into verse. Characters such as Fontana’s courtly father, the wine-bibbing cardinal, and the majority of the Nazis—though factually based in many cases—are stereotypes.

And in the key scene, the one with the Pope, Hochhuth uses an unworthy touch. It opens with the Pope’s concern about money. In the historical notes that he appends to the published play the dramatist substantiates this concern, as he does every other statement attributed by him to the Pope. But it is not the accuracy that is questioned here; surely every pope has had to be concerned about money. In the one scene given the Pope, it seems facile, cartooning mockery to have used financial interest as our first glimpse of Pius. In fact the whole scene presents an incomplete portrait of the Pope, even though no accusation of Hochhuth’s is without basis, even though he cites the shelter that the Vatican gave thousands of Jews. Fontana himself has told us that he kept a portrait of Pacelli (Pius’s surname at birth) over his bed as a boy, that partly because of this prelate he himself entered the Church. There is no hint of attractive qualities in the Pius drawn here.

Nevertheless, despite its very considerable intrinsic flaws, *The Deputy* is a work of importance and, obviously, of great impact. It is not possible to “settle” here the question of whether or not the Pope should have spoken out against the massacre of the Jews. We can note, however, that his refusal to speak cannot be understood as a religious decision; Christ’s teachings leave no conceivable alternative to the protest against murder. It was a political and diplomatic and temporal decision. In fairness, we must balance this with the fact that the results of the Pope’s utterance, had he made it, must remain forever entirely hypothetical: whether it would have saved Jewish lives or would have cost the lives of even the small fraction who escaped or would have cost lives of German and German-governed Catholics.

It is difficult to imagine that, at that time and with the given physical limitations, many more people could have been slaughtered than were; still, this, too, is conjecture. No one will ever know. All that can be argued is whether the Pope’s silence was un-Christian.

### **Just Like Life, Only Different (*New York Times*, 27 February 1966)**

Two recent arrivals, *Hostile Witness* and *Wait Until Dark*, underline again some differences and relations between life and art. These plays also underline a difference between the theater now and as it was.

*Hostile Witness*, an English courtroom drama, reminded me that I had once been the foreman of the jury in a criminal trial that lasted nine weeks. That lengthy case gave me plenty of time to perceive the basic deception of the courtroom: it looks like a theater, but it isn’t. There is an audience, there are a protagonist and an antagonist, and there is a quasi-chorus—the judge. But legal folk insist on being

concerned with matters other than sustaining the interest of the spectators, including the jury. There are innumerable delays, recesses, readings of documents into the record, and—most irritating of all—whispered conferences at the bench between judge and both attorneys, out of earshot. This is poor dramaturgy. For the spectator, what holds it all together between the high points of interest is the constant realization that a live man—right there before you—will or will not have years sheared off his free life because of these proceedings.

The theater is just the reverse. We know between the high points of a courtroom play, and even during those points, that the worst sentence the man in the dock can really get is a long run. But if the play and the production are competently made, the law's delays have been eliminated. (In fact, that is a basic reason why no stage trial is ever completely lifelike.) And here is the chief difference. In the actual courtroom, a civilized man wants primarily to see justice done. At the courtroom play, that same civilized man wants to see blood—either the defendant's or, if he is innocent, the true culprit's. A courtroom play that merely proved the defendant's innocence and found nobody guilty would fizzle.

That blood-hunger is comparable to the emotions in a straight thriller like *Wait Until Dark*. Generally, the thriller's emotions are two: suspense and shock. Either we urgently want something to happen that is not happening, or something does happen that is sudden and unexpected. These two feelings are what may be called "street" emotions, as against art emotions.

Anyone who has ever been caught in traffic on the way to an appointment knows how common suspense is in life. As for shock, if—right now while you are reading this—someone unexpectedly clapped his hands just behind your head, you would feel the same vascular leap that you get from one particular moment in the last scene of *Wait Until Dark*—and without two hours of preparation.

More complex emotions come from more complex works, and—to a certain extent—vice versa. No stalled taxi or sudden noise can evoke most of the emotions in Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* or Racine's *Phaedra* or Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* The thriller (as well as the courtroom drama and other plays related to the thriller) does not distill large segments of time and experience. It refers, in heavily italicized terms, to the scares and surprises and anxiety and relief that we all feel almost every day. Because of this fact, some questions have become increasingly pertinent. Do we continue to want plays that deal chiefly in these easily accessible emotions? "Street" entertainment will always be wanted, but aren't *plays* in this vein increasingly insufficient because of what has been happening outside the theater?

Since the advent of film and radio and (especially) of television, since the Himalayan rise of the paperback book, every play that we see is subjected to extrinsic tests, whether or not we are aware of it. The theater has to compete with those four forms for the audience's time. More than that—and because of that—the theater has been elevated to a superior position. That elevation comes from several factors: price, physical location, and live actors. Radio and television are free (packed though they are with sales messages). Paperback books are cheap and available everywhere. Films are cheaper—usually much cheaper—than the theater and usually much closer at hand.

The cost of the theater, the extra physical effort needed to get to it, and the very presence of live actors in contrast to the TV or screen actors whom we see most of the time—all these give us higher expectations in the theater. It somehow therefore seems wasteful for actors to be "real" in mere entertainment; shadow actors seem

sufficient for that. This is not to argue for the intrinsic superiority of theater to film, which I do not believe and which is anyway a stupid debate. It is only to emphasize that an audience today—consciously or not—expects to get its mere entertainment free, or relatively cheap, and certainly conveniently. (The exception is the musical, for, I think, two reasons. The stage musical provides the actual presence of a lot of pretty girls; and neither film nor television is as suitable for dance as the theater.)

Visceral response is not, of course, becoming *passé*. For example, the forward-looking theories of the twentieth-century theater artist Antonin Artaud—which are evident in Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*—depend on visceral response. (This is not to say that Artaud would have admired mechanical thrillers.) These elemental emotions will live as long as the theater lives, but what is decreasingly interesting is the formula-play that evokes these emotions without putting them to any sophisticated use—either of character enlightenment or our own self-knowledge.

In paperback publishing, let me add, there are fiction items called “category” books: mysteries, science fiction, westerns, romances, and others. These category items are, as such, also serviceable in films and television and radio. But their very proliferation in those media makes them questionable in the theater. Even the person who reads a mystery a night (and such exist) may be reluctant to go to the theater to see only a stage equivalent. In the theater, the thriller or the courtroom drama needs to do more than fill the formula as another “category” item. If it is only imitatively competent—which *Hostile Witness* is and which *Wait Until Dark* is not quite—it leaves us feeling a little silly for having bothered.

It is not exactly true that the New York theater devotes itself largely to plays befitting its new, enforcedly superior position. But I think it is true that, when the theater competes with other media on their lowest terms, we have come more and more to feel that it is carrying a not-so-hot coal to Newcastle.

***Ludlow Fair and The Madness of Lady Bright*, by Lanford Wilson (*New York Times*, 23 March 1966)**

Remarks are not literature, we were told by Gertrude Stein. To this might be added: Chatter is not drama.

Lanford Wilson's bill of two one-act plays, which opened last night at the Off-Broadway Theater East, begins with *Ludlow Fair*. This is about two girls who share an apartment in New York in the East 60s. It is bedtime. One of them delivers a long self-analytical monologue while waiting for the other to come out of the bathroom. Then they have a dialogue. Then the first one goes to sleep and the second one has a monologue.

We learn that the first girl has just been robbed by a boyfriend who is only the latest in a string of men who have victimized her, that her griefs and self-doubts are habitual. We learn that the second—one of those girls who cast themselves as comics—has trouble getting any man at all and is forced to anticipate a lunch next day with her boss's skinny son. She is also trying to cure herself of swearing.

There are some mild laughs because of ludicrous realistic details like hair-curlers and a cold in the nose. There are a few invented comic bits, like the worried girl's self-administered Rorschach test. As this particular neurotic, Ann Wedgeworth gives a convincing and funny performance, with Southern accents. Sasha von Scherler is the roommate.



Wilson shows that he can imagine the dialogue that a tape recorder might have caught between the two girls in the bedroom. What he does not show is that he can use veristic surfaces—as, say, Harold Pinter does—in such a way that tensions and resonances are generated below those surfaces. As for the title of his play, the point of its allusion to a line from a cycle of poems by A. E. Housman (*A Shropshire Lad*) is unclear.

In the second play, *The Madness of Lady Bright*, the title character is aging and lonely, in a bedroom (this time in the West 80s) whose walls are covered with the autographs of lovers. Lady Bright reminisces about affairs, mostly in terms of how “good” the lovers were; hears imaginary voices and music; and ends cowering in fear on the floor. *Lady Bright* is a long monologue about a person who is not much more than a mechanic of the mattress, growing old and desperate. This in itself would be pretty stale fare for grown-ups. The only novelty—presumably intended as the redeeming factor—is that the protagonist is a male homosexual.

As one who hopes that homosexual subjects may be treated as seriously and fully as any other subject in the American theater, I note that a common, rather stupid protagonist is not more interesting because he is homosexual; and that pathos in a diluted, Tennessee Williams vein is not necessarily fresh or moving because the lonely figure in the kimono—with no mate for the night—is a male looking for males.

Cris Alexander, willowy and waxen-faced in the solo role, is up to whatever demands it makes of him. William Hunt has directed both plays as well as is needed. On the basis of these two works and an earlier one-act play (*Home Free!*) seen at the Cherry Lane Theatre last year, one can say that Wilson himself confuses playwriting with garrulousness. He knows something about writing dialogue, but he is not yet clear about which dialogue to write.

### ***The Rats*, by Gerhart Hauptmann (*New York Times*, 13 April 1966)**

Yesterday’s newspaper is dull today, but fifty years from now it regains interest—of a quite different kind. The naturalistic dramatists of the early part of the twentieth century set out to tell the truth and shame theatricality, but today it is sometimes not their truth but their theatrical skill that holds us.

Last night at New York’s City Center the Bavarian State Theater opened its production of Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Rats*, which was written in 1911. Hauptmann was the virtual founder of naturalism in the German theater, and with this play he left that style for other styles. *The Rats* no longer seems a slice of life. But it is a slice of *drama*, and as such it has a certain interest.

The play is set in a large Berlin tenement—that inter-European tenement which could also be in Paris or Rome or Warsaw—the dwelling place of poor people whose heritage of centuries is poverty. Two main stories interweave. One is of a mason’s wife who buys a newborn illegitimate baby from its mother. To the mason, who has been away for some months, his wife pretends the baby is their own. She wants it to replace their child who died a few years before. The other story is of a wily, robustious theater manager and his family, who are down on their luck and have made their way to this tenement.

The first story ends in tragedy, as the unwed mother tries to regain her child from the mason’s wife. The second story ends more happily but ironically. For the manager, devoted to romantic fustian and proud of his eye for the theater, has never had the slightest sense of the drama that has been taking place all around him.

The Bavarian State Theater presents *The Rats* as a period piece in spirit as well as subject. The sets by Jürgen Rose have the cavernous feel of old opera-house scenery—reflecting the dimensions of the stage rather than of any likely dwelling. Space is out of proportion to human size, and there is little furniture to fill it. The direction by Helmut Heinrichs fits this operatic concept. Most of the action takes place well downstage, in a line more or less parallel with the footlights. When a character finishes his dialogue, he waits, statue-like, for dialogue on the other side of the stage to finish and turn to him again. Or he “withdraws” by looking out a window, oblivious of sound behind him until he is spoken to.

The acting in general has a flavor that American actors might hesitate to attempt even if they were familiar with it. Since the Bavarian State Theater company also performed an appropriately reticent *Woyzeck* (as with Büchner’s drama, transistor-radio translation here helps those who cannot understand German—particularly the thick Berlin dialect of *The Rats*), this second style is presumable proof of range, not limitation. But it is nonetheless a style of external effects rather than internal causes.

Playing the mason’s wife, for example, Maria Wimmer, who has a fine face, displays emotions that sometimes seem to belong more to her general equipment as an actress than to the character. Martin Benrath, as her degenerate brother, and Max Mairich, as the concierge, have two of those graphic vignette parts that are dear—perhaps too dear—to actors’ hearts. Karl Maria Schley, as the old stager, uses relative tact in a role that might be as overdone as is Elfriede Kuzmany’s drug-addicted madam. Gerd Brüdern is solid as the mason who is a proletarian tower of deceived strength.

Alfred Kerr, the famous German critic who was a contemporary and admirer of Hauptmann, said of the dramatist’s naturalistic plays, “This is not accuracy; this is intuition.” The remark is true today, as well, but in way that Kerr did not intend. Insofar as this play can still hold us—which is not of the time—it is not with its accurate reproduction of life as we know it, but with Hauptmann’s intuition for the theatrical.

### **Herbert Blau and Jules Irving (*New York Times*, 17 April 1966)**

The work of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater, in its first season under Herbert Blau and Jules Irving, is related to the important—and much discussed—subject of resident theaters. (Technically the Lincoln Center company itself is a resident theater, but here I use the term in the usual way: to mean a theater outside New York City.)

Blau and Irving were the directors of one of the best-known resident theaters in the United States, the Actors’ Workshop in San Francisco, which they founded in 1952 and where they produced almost 100 plays. I saw none of those productions, but I shared the general admiration for the Workshop’s principles and the quality of their repertory. I read with interest the praise that visitors bestowed on them. However, the first Blau-Irving season in New York suggests that the praise was overpraise, caused by two factors that lie waiting like snares for all of us visitors to resident theaters: admiration for the divergence from commercial policies, and surprise because the work is better than one may have expected outside New York.

We are entitled to believe that these directors were overpraised in San Francisco because of their first season in New York. Blau and Irving came here after

thirteen years' experience, bringing with them from San Francisco more than a dozen actors who had worked with them for varying periods, a designer, and a composer. One tries to apply the same standards to a production in New York as to a production anywhere else, and vice versa. But, for purposes of relevant comparison, let me use as a standard the work I have so far seen of resident theaters. On that basis, the Blau-Ingving company in New York is no less spotty than most of the less-celebrated resident companies I have seen across America, and the level of direction throughout this first season has been notably lower than the level in those other theaters taken as a whole.

In short, the Actors' Workshop has in essence been moved to New York and has shrunk in a different context. Their principles and aims have not been compromised, but standards of judgment applied to them have changed. Critics and audiences in the metropolitan area, whatever else may be true of them, do not need to be grateful for the mere fact of a theater's existence. And the Blau-Ingving group seem to be the first major victims of a fallacy grounded in sympathy. Now another fallacy arises, which I shall detail in the paragraphs to follow.

Their first two productions, Büchner's *Danton's Death* and Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, were lamentable. The third production, Sartre's *The Condemned of Altona*, was unsatisfactory. The fourth production, Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which is the first play directed in New York by Jules Ingving, is enjoyable. Ingving shows some command of stagecraft and some ability to use the resources of the Vivian Beaumont Theater, instead of being harried by them. He makes the play lucid and vigorous. One is neither bored by his work nor staggered by any brilliance on his part.

Yet it is held by some that the production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* represents an improvement in the company. This seems fallacious to me. I think the fact that the Brecht show is the best of the lot is a matter of scheduling, not growth. Brecht's play is in several senses easier than the other three plays: it is mostly made up of a lot of small parts; it calls for no deep emotion or polished style; it has a lot of muscular action and pageantry. It could have been produced by Ingving as the first offering of the season, and there is no evidence that the other three plays, with the casts and directors they had, would then have been a whit better. Instead of seeming an ascent, the season would have seemed a toboggan slide.

There are some cruel but inescapable truths about this company that must be faced, it seems to me. First, the argument that they ought to be allowed time for growth is invalid. The directors and some of the company have *had* thirteen years. Most of the basic company have had considerable experience in San Francisco under Blau and Ingving. Adjustment to a new theatrical space? How long does a competent director need to adjust to a new theater? These men had months. How long does an actor need to adjust to a larger house? Would any competent actor claim that it takes more than a week? (Of rehearsal, that is.)

Some argument for patience might have been made for the first Lincoln Center company, under the Elia Kazan-Robert Whitehead management, which was unsatisfactory for different reasons. But the Blau-Ingving group, by coming to New York as (basically) a company, have asked to be judged as a company, established and knit. And it seems mere dream—at this relatively late stage in their careers—to hope for the needed improvement from them. It seems a sheer waste of time to allow this company a year or two years or five years to achieve worthy ensemble status, let alone first-rank quality.

Here are some things we know about this group, in my view. Jules Irving is a theatrically competent director, but Herbert Blau, who directed the Büchner and the Sartre, has yet to show that he is one. We know that Robert Symonds, who directed *The Country Wife*, has no gift for artificial comedy. We know that none of the directors has a completely reliable sense of casting. We know that Morton Subotnick, the composer who provided the scores for the Büchner and the Brecht plays, is unimpressive. But James Hart Stearns, who did the settings for two of the plays and the costumes for three of them (including the masks for the Brecht), is a gifted and valuable designer.

There are a few good male actors in the company. The best, beyond question, is Symonds, whose Robespierre was better than it looked in the distressing production of *Danton's Death* and whose Azdak, in the current production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, is fine. (But in *The Country Wife* he played as ineptly as he directed.) Ray Fry, for his part, is a versatile comedian. Tom Rosqui, badly miscast in *The Condemned of Altona*, nevertheless demonstrated talent. Michael Granger has broad, brusque comic ability. Beyond them, the only really interesting acting by men came from persons who are not, as far as I know, permanent members of the company.

The situation with actresses is even worse. Carolyn Coates is an acceptable but by no means extraordinary actress, who was pleasant in the Wycherley but inadequate in the Sartre play. Elizabeth Huddle has a likable personality but not much power or resource. She gave a passable drama-school performance in the leading female role in the Wycherley; she is somewhat better than that as Grusha in the Brecht—though far from compelling—because her personality and person are so right for this nearly actor-proof part. Not much can be said in favor of any other woman in the company.

All in all, it is a gloomy report and, if matters are unaltered, foretells a gloomy future. This company does not need additions only; it needs radical revision. I put it to Blau, a man of intellect and conscience, whose devotion to high theatrical aims is as well proved as his directorial ability is not proved: if he continues to direct plays, instead of limiting himself to administration and policy, will this be an act of perseverance and well-founded hope, or will it be possibly harmful stubbornness? I put it to both Blau and Irving: if they do not bring in other directors and if they keep their basic acting company as it is, will this be a decision for the good of their theater—and for the theater in general—or will it be mere loyalty? And I mean “mere.” Along with other well-wishers, then, I ask these two directors, what will they do to improve the level of Lincoln Center productions? That level needs huge improvement, and the present personnel give small reason to believe that they can effect it.

One last matter: there is no point in arguing that other grave problems are involved, such as budget, availability of actors, and so on. *These problems are completely irrelevant to us.* We don't go to the theater to “understand” budgetary problems or actor-availability problems or the problems of repertory growth, or any other problems. Concessions, as against imaginable perfection, can always be made, but they have to be earned—by the quality of the work seen. What we want when we go to an art theater is art, not the reasons why art could not yet be made. And it is precisely the hope for art that is dim with the present Lincoln Center company. In a perverse way, the relative success of the Brecht play almost confirms this: for the intrinsic reasons I have noted and because much of the lively acting in it is done by presumable transients, jobbed in for the occasion.

Hope cannot be offered for this company as it stands, then. I do offer the directors Blau and Irving my uttermost good wishes. If they can bring about the needed improvement without profound changes, I will—most happily—eat my words. But, without such changes, I do not believe it is possible. Do they?

***When We Dead Awaken*, by Henrik Ibsen (New York Times, 19 April 1966)**

Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* is extremely difficult to perform, almost forbiddingly so. There is probably a way to realize it on the stage, but the way has not been found on West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. The production that opened there last night at the Masque Theater has nothing at all to recommend it.

This is Ibsen's last play, completed in 1899 when he was seventy-one, and is commonly held to be strongly autobiographical. An aging, world-famous sculptor, restless and unhappy, returns to Norway with his doting but imperceptive young wife. They visit a spa where he meets again the woman who was the inspiration for his masterwork and who has been deranged by their separation. Reunited and rekindled to aspiration, the artist and this woman make a symbolic ascent into the mountains—to death and transfiguration on the heights.

The play confronts its idealistic scheme so unabashedly that it demands a performance of direct poetic power, without the safeguards of oblique understatement. The limitations of the Masque performance begin with the translation that is used. No translator is credited, so no person can be blamed for lines like "Let us renew our rhapsody of joy" or "A tame but watchful bird of prey keeps a vigil over me." (After the young James Joyce read this play in a French translation, he learned Norwegian to avoid translations and read Ibsen in the original.)

But even a translation of genius would not help this production. Rosemary Tory, who plays Irene, the woman of inspiration, has a pretty face. Jack Ramage, as the bear hunter (Ulfheim) who goes off with the sculptor's wife, has athletic vigor. But they are not up to their roles, nor are any of the rest of the cast. The direction by Henry Calvert insures that, when the performance is not oppressive, it is embarrassing.

On the small stage of the masque there is no curtain. Let us mercifully draw one here.

***The World of Günter Grass* (New York Times, 27 April 1966)**

Some well-intentioned admirers of Günter Grass are doing him a disservice on lower Third Avenue. Selections from the German author's works have been woven into a program called "The World of Günter Grass," which opened last night at the Pocket Theater. It is a production full of teases, hints, and dissatisfactions.

Most of the material seems to come from Grass's novels *The Tin Drum* and *Dog Years*, works of richness and fascination. Dennis Rosa, with the help of Sandra Hochman and A. Leslie Willson, has put together these extracts and has directed the result. It resembles a play more than a staged reading. It employs a setting by Richard Seger, some of Roger Morgan's good lighting, and three small screens on which photographs and drawings are flashed as comment. Also there is pungent music—by a ragtime band (the archaic adjective seems right) that pokes fun, through Wagnerian themes, at the Wagnerian grandeur of the era being examined. This score, by Ryan Edwards, is quietly murderous.

The music outshines the play, which of course it shouldn't. The adaptation is a quick tour of the moral-political geography of Germany between the rise of Hitler and the end of World War II. The principals are the Poet, a sort of narrator; Oskar, the dwarf of *The Tin Drum* (who is made up to resemble Grass); a male and a female rat; and Prinz, the dog of *Dog Years*. The actors of the animals wear imaginative appurtenances.

The various elements of the program were not meant to make a conventional, plotted play. The relevant point is that they do not fuse into a consistently interesting, truly representative poetic organism. There are some individual scenes that fare pretty well: Oskar's demonstration of how he cows his teacher by shattering glass with his voice; a sad dialogue between the two stranded rats; some of a long scene in which the disguise of persistent Hitlerism is unmasked. But the evening is generally unsuccessful.

Partly this is because it is not well performed. Only Charles Durning, as the male rat and as a Discussion Leader, is completely credible. The four other actors are victims of transparent staginess. In addition, Rosa has imposed a portentousness on the pacing and staging that often leaves a scene hanging like a heavy framework with thin content.

Which is certainly not true of Grass's books. But in this adaptation many of the abstracted items look thin in themselves, and their union is not cumulative or compelling. Worst of all is the effect of moral simplification. The historical issues, as Grass shows so remarkably in his novels, are much more profound than the wickedness and perversity of some Germans or even of many Germans. Yet the opposite is what one might gather at the Pocket Theater. Thus, insofar as the adaptation makes any clear statement, it minimizes the author.

It does not even justify itself sheerly as a show. It seems more like an elongated television commercial for Grass's books. As against some similar productions, where there were at least some purely theatrical virtues, there seems no reason to bother with this evening if one can read. An added irony is that Grass has written several plays, none of which has yet been performed in the U.S. Couldn't his work for the stage have had priority over his work for the page?

### ***Ivanov*, by Anton Chekhov (*New York Times*, 4 May 1966)**

The weakness of Chekhov's *Ivanov* is the strength of Chekhov elsewhere. In his first full-length play, which was revived last night at the Shubert Theater, the imperfect elements in craft and content remind us of how this master perfected them later. Do pairs of characters exit on one side while pairs of characters enter from the other? We know that this clanky construction was later replaced by magical technique. Are the hero's negativeness and self-pity somewhat static? We know how Chekhov proceeded to make inertia one of the great forces in modern drama.

Only a genius could have written this early play; but even early genius has not reclaimed it from the doldrums—the bony shape and primary colors of most of its characters. Yet, faults and all, *Ivanov* could come rewardingly to life in a flavorful and penetrating production. This new production is, at its best, made of smooth surfaces; and, at its worst, is worse than it has any right to be.

John Gielgud plays the man in the drama's bitter triangle: Ivanov, an impoverished and dispirited landowner, with a sick wife whom he once loved but loves no longer. He is attracted to the daughter of a wealthy neighbor. His wife learns

of this affair and dies wretchedly. About to marry the girl, Ivanov is overwhelmed with self-disgust and shoots himself.

As in all his plays, Chekhov is trying here to bare some inner truth about humanity, not to explain but to destroy fictitious wrappings, to sympathize and wonder at it all. Anti-sentimentality is his weapon; love for self-contradictory mankind is his impulse. Thus Ivanov faces the fact that the news of his wife's doom only makes him feel weary; that the young girl's view of him as a Hamlet-figure is only her eager distortion; and that the young doctor's view of him as a villain is equally distorted. He is simply a man without a mainspring, but with enough insight to perceive it, enough tenderness to regret it, and enough taste to loathe the effect on himself and others.

I have admired Gielgud since I saw his Hamlet thirty years ago. He is one of the few English-speaking actors in my time who have touched true nobility. Sadly I report that Ivanov is not one of his successes. Grant that the role consists principally of one chord; still, only in a few moments, in the first scenes of Act I and Act II, does he sound that chord deeply. The crescendo to the suicide—again granting that Chekhov has not done much to help—is unrealized. What is mainly missing is the consummate vocal subtlety that has heightened so much of Gielgud's acting. His voice, which has always been his chief artistic instrument, here does not substantiate Ivanov's mind and hell.

The lovely Vivien Leigh, too, gives us only surfaces in most of her scenes as the ailing wife. What is written as light chatter is played as light chatter, without the Chekhovian undertone. This is one reason why her last horrible confrontation with her husband seems a cut-and-dried "quarrel scene," not the bursting of an inner dam. For her part, Jennifer Hilary, who plays the girl, fails to suffuse the character with the warm, overrunning, romantic bloom that it needs. What we get instead is a sort of finishing-school sensitivity, pretty enough but insufficient. As her father, Roland Culver is solid, easily in charge—a pleasure to watch.

But Edward Atienza, as an old uncle, comes on with so many attributes of age that we know that the actor himself must be a younger man. Could not Atienza have observed Ethel Griffies? Griffies, who plays a marriage broker, is now eighty-eight, in her eighty-sixth year on the stage, and seems about a century younger than Atienza's character. It would be impertinent, however, to compliment Griffies on anything but her performance: she is an actress, and she is acting excellently. John Merivale, as the young doctor, is not. He is stiff and unresonant in a part whose idealistic qualities are badly needed to help balance the design. Ronald Radd, as the boorish estate manager, himself gives an adequate but trite performance.

In addition to playing the leading role, John Gielgud has directed *Ivanov*. In the past his direction has varied widely, from the crisp *Importance of Being Earnest* to the lax *Hamlet* with Richard Burton. This new production is middle-ground, serviceable. Rouben Ter-Arutunian's settings for it do not fall down, but praise must end there. They have little beauty of design or ingenuity of stagecraft.

It would be pleasant to be able to thank Gielgud for this production—exactly because *Ivanov* is not top-drawer Chekhov and yet one wants the chance to see everything by this beloved author. But what we get here mostly is silhouette without much content: and in silhouette, the play's defects are emphasized.

***The Journey of the Fifth Horse*, by Ronald Ribman (New York Times, 8 May 1966)**

In all the arts, new work sometimes derives from older work; and in the theater this is a custom (almost) more honored in the observance than in the breach. Not to mention Shakespeare, such quick examples come to mind as Shaw, whose *Man and Superman* is his version of *Don Giovanni*, and Brecht, who used the process several times—most famously in *The Threepenny Opera*, which he derived from John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*.

Ronald Ribman, a young American, has tried this procedure in his play *The Journey of the Fifth Horse* (at the American Place Theater in New York), which is partly based on Turgenev's story "Diary of a Superfluous Man." Turgenev's hero is a nineteenth-century Russian landowner named Chulkaturin, whose life is irrelevant to those around him. After his death, even his diary is rejected—by a publisher's reader. Out of the few final words that note this rejection, Ribman has conceived his play. He has imagined the publisher's reader, Zoditch, as a man whose life has parallels with that of the person he is reading about. The play moves on three interweaving lines; Chulkaturin's life, from Turgenev; Zoditch's realities; and Zoditch's fantasies—the latter two invented by Ribman.

Some of the actors glide from one story to another. Susan Anspach plays Chulkaturin's beloved, whom he loses twice, and she also plays one of the two women whom Zoditch loses. Lee Wallace plays the successful rivals of both Chulkaturin and Zoditch.

The structure of *The Journey of the Fifth Horse* is inviting, but the result is disappointing. Essentially, Ribman has reduced Turgenev and not compensated with Ribman. This is not glibly to batter a young author with a great name. Ribman is a writer of serious intent and some ability. But his Zoditch is "superfluous" for reasons quite different from Chulkaturin's. The former is a man frustrated in acquisition—of power and sex—while Chulkaturin is defeated in his attempts at union—in love and in a sense social pertinence. And the lesser and less interesting man takes over much of the play.

Even this might be a trenchant opposition—an insectile man crawling over an aspiring man—except that Zoditch does not deepen in character or engage in action. Quite early in the play we know all that we will ever know about him, and, unlike Chulkaturin, he has no story. His life is largely fantasy, and the fantasies are highly repetitive and predictable—the common stuff of a petty, pettifogging clerk. In raising Zoditch to equal partnership, Ribman has been forced to diminish Chulkaturin, to "state" him merely. Turgenev does not provide a detailed psychological dossier, but he did give his hero space and texture in which to exist dimensionally. In the original, we are convinced of Chulkaturin's own conviction that he is disconnected—in a way that anticipates the consciousness of disconnections in the modern temperament.

Flaubert, another maker of the modern temperament, wrote to Turgenev after he read the story: "How many things that I myself have felt and experienced I have rediscovered in your pages!" Many of us might say the same—but not about the Chulkaturin at the American Place. He is synopsized, rather than dramatized, and this vitiates both our interest in him and Ribman's intended counterpoint. One example of how the character has been stripped: the "fifth horse" in the title refers to an anecdote about an extra horse tied on to a four-horse carriage. In the Turgenev story, Chulkaturin himself recalls the incident and applies it to himself. "I, too, have simply



been tied on . . . But,” the dying man adds, “thank goodness, the post-house is not far away now.” Ribman, however, brings in a character—not seen before or after—to tell the fifth-horse anecdote. Thus it becomes an italicized, clumsy insert, and Chulkaturin is robbed of an enriching insight about himself.

The fundamental flaw of the play is that the basic device remains a device. We are never persuaded of Ribman’s *purpose* in creating the character of Zoditch and the play’s intricate structure. All that really grows out of it is the irony of Zoditch’s sneering at Chulkaturin, as he reads, when his own condition is really no better than the other man’s and his personal stature is much less. But this irony is quickly perceived, and is not furthered. Overall, too, there hovers an assumption that the very choice of this period, with Ribman’s reasonable facsimile of period characteristics and details, automatically supplies seriousness, merely because that age is associated with so much great literature. It seems an attempt at profundity-by-association.

Ribman has ambitions that are out of the playwriting ordinary. He has some gift with words and some ingenuity. What he does not show is a grip of dramatic character: character not merely as portrait but as dynamic and interacting organism. After getting his initial idea, he enjoyed it at considerable length, I think, rather than utilizing it dramatically; then he simply forced a thematically intertwined ending. His play, instead of being an illuminating expansion of the original, is itself a kind of fifth horse to Turgenev.

The production itself is outstandingly happy in two elements. Kert Lundell’s setting is almost miraculous. It converts the relatively small stage of the American Place into a number of widely varied playing areas, and it expedites the play’s transitions in time, place, and reality. Dustin Hoffman’s performance of Zoditch, for its part, has the vitality of the born actor and the fine control of the skillful one. With sharp comic technique, he makes this unattractive man both funny and pathetic. Hoffman is only in his twenties. Perhaps, the insanities of the theater world permitting, we will be allowed to watch an extraordinary career develop—alongside, one hopes, Ronald Ribman’s own growing art.

### ***Henry V*, by William Shakespeare (*New York Times*, 8 June 1966)**

The Stratford (Canada) Shakespearean Festival opened its fourteenth season last night with Michael Langham’s production of *Henry V*. The capacity festive audience saw a performance by an ensemble whose best quality is that it is a true Shakespearean company. The actors do not play Shakespeare as an act of piety or resurrection. They have no special theory to prove, nor are they worried about Shakespeare’s timeliness. They present the play as a theatrical event—in straightforward yet poetic style, marked by good speech, good voices, and good understanding of good verse.

Yet this *Henry V* is only moderately successful because the part of Henry himself needs a virtuoso. Douglas Rain is a resourceful, spry, fairly intense actor, but he is not the magnetic young king-general who sparked a nation. He does not have the trumpet-voice and ringing address without which the big speeches are only big speeches, however intelligently done, instead of thrilling verbal banners.

Under Langham’s direction the play moves energetically: Henry’s expedition to gain the French crown that he believes is his; the death of Falstaff and the expedition of his henchmen to the war; the French court’s disdain of the young

Henry; their defeat and Henry's winning courtship of the French princess. It is all stroked in broadly across the open stage of the festival theater.

As usual, almost no scenery is employed. Visual reliance is placed on costumes (as in Shakespeare's own day), and Desmond Heeley has supplied superb ones. The English are dressed in the russets and maroons and browns of earth, the French in the white and gold and blue of elegance. And a word for the makeup: these soldiers really look battle-stained, not painted.

*Henry V* starts on a prosy level with the Chorus, played by William Hutt. (Throughout the play he explains those vaulting odes to imagination like a finger-wagging schoolmaster.) After some boring exposition by two bishops, we get to a number of solid performances in the English court, notably Tony van Bridge as Exeter and Max Helpmann as Westmoreland. A group of able French-Canadian actors portray the unwise French court with grace and, one may add, broadmindedness. Jean Gascon, the associate director of the festival, is gruffly strong as the French king, and Diana Leblanc is winning as his daughter. Only one of the French actors is disappointing—Gaëtan Labrèche, who minces overmuch as the Dauphin.

The low-life characters are crammed full of their low life: Powys Thomas as Pistol, Lewis Gordon as Nym, and that endearing comedian Eric Christmas as Bardolph. Special praise to Amelia Hall, who, as Mistress Quickly, makes her account of Falstaff's death a sad little Elizabethan folk song. And the Fluellen of Bernard Behrens is a valiant and funny prig.

All these performers provide a setting for the protagonist that is somewhat brighter than he is. Rain's Henry is evidently meant to be the young roistering Prince Hal seen a bit later, growing to power. But the *theatrical* fact of the matter is that there is no connection between Hal and King Henry. The role of Hal, the gamesome prince, called for one kind of acting, the light juvenile; but Henry, the young king, called for the heroic. And Rain suggests more Hal than Henry.

Without a blazing Henry, this play—of war for a king's ambition, of death in battle esteemed according to the berths of the men who have died—often fails to involve a modern audience emotionally. With an overwhelming actor, *Henry V* is a gripping chronicle of life as it was once valued and pursued; but a lesser Henry too often gives us the chance to withdraw, untouched by theatrical heat, to view the play through dispassionate eyes. We ought to feel at least some envy for the men who were at the Battle of Agincourt; instead, we are content to be in Stratford.

### ***Henry VI*, by William Shakespeare (*New York Times*, 9 June 1966)**

The Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, is making a royal progress through a sequence of Shakespeare's royal plays. They began two years ago with *Richard II*, advanced last year with *Henry IV, Part 1*, and again on Monday with *Henry V*; they continued last night with a production of *Henry VI*. Other plays outside the cycle have been and will be presented, but the historical sequence will continue through next year's production of *Richard III*.

The trilogy about Henry VI is among the least frequently performed of Shakespeare plays. It was presented yesterday evening in a condensed version drawn from Part I and much of Part II. The editing was done three years ago by John Barton for the British Royal Shakespeare Company, and a skillful, sensitive job it is, weaving a fairly firm-textured fabric out of these somewhat dispersed, youthful plays. In this

production, theatrical strengths supplement the author's weaknesses, and the result is a generally fascinating show.

The play begins with the death of Henry V, the warrior king, and the accession of his gentle son. The seesaw fortunes of the French wars; the rise, capture, and execution of Joan of Arc; the plots and counterplots among the English nobles; Henry's marriage; his queen's affections for the Earl of Suffolk; the genesis of the bloody Wars of the Roses; the spate of ambition, guile, and murder flooding within the riverbanks of religion (with the clerics' participation)—all these are the materials of the drama. As against the play about the preceding Henry, *Henry V*, there is here no rich loam of common characters that establishes the ground on which these nobles stood. *Henry VI* deals almost entirely with power and the powerful.

The language in this drama is far below the level of later Shakespeare, both in music and resonance. (Compare Talbot's "Fight, Soldiers, Fight" with Henry V's speeches to his troops.) Yet *Henry VI* has, first, the minimal poetic charge of the era in which it was written—when verse was as natural to stage speech as the wisecrack is today; and, second, through the common currency of the age, there is often a glimpse of Shakespearean-cum-cosmic ends, such as Bedford's opening speech, "Hung be the heavens with black." The action itself, it's true, sometimes degenerates into crass melodrama, as when Queen Margaret mourns over the severed head of her lover (which she carries around in a bag!). But it also has the born dramatist's feeling for conflict and for character development, as in Margaret's change from a flirtatious princess to the devious queen of a weak-willed husband.

Like all the chronicle plays, *Henry VI* was designed to recount English history to an English audience that wanted the story full of peeps into the lives of the great, with reassurance of audience members' prejudices and nourishment of their ideals. To us, the play is gripping as a vital dramatization of those factors, heightened by present-day relevances and a sense of perennial human complexity. Even in this early work, which few believe was written entirely by Shakespeare, such a sense is apparent.

The success of this production begins with the director, John Hirsch, who is making his Stratford debut. (He founded the well-reputed Manitoba Theater Center in Canada.) Hirsch is highly skilled in the Guthrie-Campbell-Langham vein of pageantry and alarums on the open stage, a style generic to this theater festival, but he shows a personal quality of intense subjectivity as well. For instance, the disputes in the Council Chamber become bruising contests of naked ego. Hirsch has also used some obtrusive touches of hyperrealism in the killings, however, and the large amount of battle detail sometimes seems pseudo-CinemaScope rather than genuine Shakespeare. All stage battles are, at best, successful acrobatics, at worst, nervous-making distractions. They ought to be symbolized as succinctly as possible, since they can never make war real. But on the whole, Hirsch has worked impressively in this production. And again Desmond Heeley has designed costumes that reveal a stage eye for fabric as well as for color and cut, and in addition he has supplied the few scenic elements.

Hirsch has had a remarkably fine company to work with, seasoned in their author and each other, and he has cast them well. In voice and personal flavor, the production of this *Henry VI* has been orchestrated in such a way that it is always lucid yet almost always chemically exciting. Tony van Bridge, who was a forceful Exeter the night before, is even better here as the Duke of Gloucester. (Van Bridge's speech of anger at the king's marriage contract should be heard by all Shakespearean actors

as a model of sustained line.) Briain Petchey, as the gentle King Henry VI, is interesting and affecting from his first utterance. Frances Hyland herself is flawless as Margaret, and, as Joan of Arc, Martha Henry is truer than Shakespeare's political cartoon of the maid. But there are literally too many good performances to praise. Aside from the fact that the French-Canadian actors in the French roles are not always understandable, there is little to be faulted in the acting.

The Stratford *Henry V* showed how some great plays are handicapped in a good company that does not have a magnificent actor or two. But *Henry VI* is a play made for a company of high general competence. This does not mean that it is easy to perform. This company has met a difficult challenge admirably. They can be proud—audiences can be glad.

***Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare (New York Times, 10 June 1966)**

Here's a paradox for you. On Tuesday the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, presented *Henry VI*, a weak play, which the company gave life through their theatrical strengths. Last night they presented *Twelfth Night*, a gem of romance, which they fumbled.

This is the third of the Festival's three Shakespearean productions this year. A comedy that lives in a rarefied air of elegant amorousness, it has been directed by David William with a weak grasp of its style and with faint sense of mood or movement. Moreover, only a few of the company's better actors are in the cast, and some of the larger roles are performed in a way that would discredit a lesser theater.

Martha Henry, who was a remarkable Joan the Maid in *Henry VI*, plays Viola, the heroine who is shipwrecked on the coast of mythical Illyria; dons male attire in self-protection; then falls in love with the duke who employs her while the duke's adored Countess Olivia falls in love with this girl in disguise. Henry has a good, clear-featured actress's face and an attractive voice, occasionally husky, that is both feminine and friendly. She has stage presence and charm. But she plays her role in this comedy of poetic conceits almost as if it were in a contemporary situation comedy. The famous lyric "willow cabin" speech is virtually broken into prose here. The soliloquy in which she realizes that Olivia is falling in love with her has the inflections that an appealingly perplexed television ingénue might give it.

Duke Orsino himself is conceived by the director William as a ridiculous, sighing, Gilbert-and-Sullivan swain, thus negating the man called "noble in nature as in name" and thus making a fool of the girl who falls in love with him. In this role Christopher Newton is awkward in gesture and leaden in effect. Roberta Maxwell, the Countess Olivia, possibly has some function in a first-class company, but, as yet, it is not to act major roles that call for an interesting voice, largeness of concept, and romantic flavor. For his part, Sir Toby Belch, that hearty, carousing Elizabethan, is played so pallidly and superficially by Douglas Rain that he might as well be called Sir Toby Hiccup.

As Malvolio, Olivia's affected and ambitious steward, Leo Ciceri reveals no idea of the exaggerated profile of the part and no hint of comic ability. Blustering is substituted for incisiveness. (And, at the end, William falls into the snare of making Malvolio a seriously pitiful figure when he is victimized in a prank.) A particular disappointment is Eric Christmas—usually a dependable clown—as Feste the jester. This wry, quick-tongued fool is portrayed as an oldster (possibly because he was a pet of Olivia's dead father) who putters about like a damp rustic wit in an Illyrian country

store. In all the rest of the cast, only Briain Petchey (Henry VI the night before) gives a performance that is close to the spirit of his part and the play. His Andrew Aguecheek is lank, silly, touching—an appropriate comic abstraction.

The several important songs are sung inadequately by Christmas, and their lovely verses have been inadequately set by Louis Applebaum, who wrote all the incidental music. Brian Jackson's costumes, on their side, seem to have been inspired by Rubens, including Rubens' baroque vision of the classical. They are sumptuous clothes, but they make the thin performances look thinner.

A *Twelfth Night* that is not a stylish celebration of the loveliness of being in love, contrasted with ribald fun, has small excuse for being. The play is related to the truths of love as dance is to walking, and here it is largely peopled by pedestrians. In spirit, imagination, and in simple technique, this production is not up to the Stratford standard.

### **Minnesota Theater Company (*New York Times*, 12 June 1966)**

The Minnesota Theater Company, whose three new productions I saw recently at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, displays the highest general level of acting of any American resident theater I have visited so far. For that very reason, their work raises a significant question. The question has no answer at present, but that does not eliminate the question.

The Minnesota Company has an avowed classical intent. They want primarily to do the great plays of all ages and, in four seasons, they have already presented Shakespeare (four plays), Jonson, Molière, Congreve, and Shaw, among others. In the fall they will mount a new version of Aeschylus' Orestes trilogy. The question is: Can an ensemble company of good general competence cope with plays that have tremendous leading roles?

We all know that many of the companies for which great plays were written—Shakespeare's company at the Globe, Molière's Illustrious Theater—were what we would call ensembles: relatively permanent groups who developed a homogeneous style and played "as cast." Their intent was to make an effect as a whole, not to promote individuals. Can such a plan work today?

Our knowledge of the quality of acting in the Shakespeare and Molière companies is largely deductive. We deduce that, if a master dramatist wrote a part that calls for special abilities in an actor, then the actor had those abilities. We may be wrong. Possibly Shakespeare refused to be limited by what may have been Richard Burbage's limitations. Perhaps Shakespeare thought:

Poor old Burbage can only achieve about 70% of this role, but why should I limit my art to *his* 70%? Neither marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive my plays, and long after both of us are dust, someone will come along who can do 90 or 95% of the role. Why cheat that future actor?

But even if our deductions about those actors are correct, they had a quite different kind of training and a quite different kind of professional conditioning. Service in a theater company was virtually the only possible life for an actor; therefore the best actors of the day were in companies and had nothing else to expect. Equally important, audiences expected nothing else. Although there were certainly leading actors in companies, there was no such concept as the star production, with a

supporting cast. Just as the actor was trained to expect company life, the audience was trained to expect company effort—and often chose their plays by theater, instead of by title or by leading actor.

Contemporary audiences have a different orientation. They may or may not appreciate good ensemble acting; but in great roles they expect—or hope—to see individual great actors. Yet those great roles—in the classics with which the Minnesota Company want to spend most of their life—call for actors who, in our society, cannot be expected to join or remain with a resident company. Not yet, anyway.

This was underscored for me in the Minnesota production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, directed by Edward Payson Call. Call's basic concept seemed to me more of a barricade than an avenue to the play's essences, but, apart from that, the role of Rosalind was entrusted to a young actress of modest gifts. Presumably the company wanted to do the play—as such—and they cast it as well as they could within their ranks. This is a worthy principle; but what about the audience? Rosalind is either one of the great female roles in English comedy or it is nothing. Let us forget about the boy who played it at the Globe, about whom we know very little indeed, and let us remember that, for living audiences, most productions of *As You Like It* have started with a star Rosalind, and the rest of the cast has been assembled after that—quite the reverse of the Minnesota procedure.

I must be quite clear that I am not arguing against the ensemble idea. The present general conditions for actors, however—in classic plays or otherwise—are hostile to such benefit and growth. The plan at the Guthrie Theater is thus a preeminent way of improving actors' art and lives. But we ought to bear in mind, I think, that at best we are in a transitional period. And in their dedication, serious theater people sometimes forget that audiences do not share their professional problems, particularly one like this—even a community audience as proud of its theater as Minneapolis is. No audience is humble enough to think of itself as a training ground, willing to attend the theater to be exercised on.

I am not proposing that the ensemble system be dropped and the ordinary hierarchical system be substituted. (I said at the outset that this is a question without a present answer.) I am simply noting that backstage solutions of backstage problems are sometimes more interesting to actors than to audiences. And I am noting that ensemble companies have courageously undertaken to reverse completely some gigantic cultural forces.

We certainly do not have on hand a wide array of star Rosalinds (to name only one role) whom audiences could choose from; and good ensemble work is very much better than nothing or than misguided solo ventures. Further, it is entirely possible that American resident companies will develop actors capable of dealing fully with the huge classic roles. Perhaps such actors already exist and I have not seen them yet. Perhaps they will appear out of the talented ones I have seen. Even so, for the audience there will still be a minor cultural reversal every time they enter one of these theaters—after a diet of films, television, and commercial theater. They will have to do without the gratifications (and assuredly there are some audience gratifications) of the star system.

And if—temporarily, anyway—heroic actors do not develop for great roles in great plays, it will be interesting to see whether modern audiences can be content with homogenized casts, running to good milk but no cream.

***Falstaff*, by William Shakespeare (New York Times, 20 June 1966)**

In its past eleven seasons the artistic fortunes of the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut, have fluctuated, but not very widely. To judge by the productions I have seen, the movement has been more often down than up. The theater opened its twelfth season last night, and the first production is somewhat low on the scale. *Falstaff* is the title that has been given to this production of *Henry IV, Part 2*. It is the weaker of the two plays about this king, as far as the historical material is concerned, but it does contain more scenes for the fat knight.

A rebellion against Henry is much talked about but is easily thwarted. The ailing monarch worries about his heir's low companions. The chief low companion, Sir John Falstaff, after some London escapades, has gone off to fight against the rebels. When the old king dies, Sir John hurries back; and in one of the most famous moments in all of dramatic literature, the new king—Henry V—spurns his former friend.

We are asked to consider this play as Falstaff's, so let us begin with him. Jerome Kilty acquits himself honorably in the role, if not really successfully. What intelligence, plan, and stage experience can do for an actor who is not naturally suited for a part, they do for Kilty here. His tenor voice is not the expected Falstaffian one, but that might only be a welcome change if other elements were present. There simply is not enough protean richness—not enough conviction that this is a man so complex that he is almost a distorted-mirror image of Hamlet. In short, although we always understand what Kilty means to do, the result is insufficiently funny or touching. His comic gifts are not strong enough, and the pathetic passages have a tinge of the elocutionary.

But if all the other actors were only up to Kilty's level, this would be a decent production. Not many of them are satisfactory, however. Douglas Watson plays Pistol with fine bravura. Paul Sparer makes Justice Shallow a theatrical figure, not a man, but he does a very amusing job of it. Patrick Hines has found his own way of playing Justice Silence, and it, too, is valid and funny. Among the non-comic characters, Alexander Clark, the Lord Chief Justice, sounds a clear and credible note.

But the rest! They range from the barely bearable to the unbelievably unbearable: comedians whose corny antics would have brought a blush to the Keystone Cops; serious actors whose constricted voices, vulgar diction, inopportune bellowing, exaggerated reactions, or accumulated clichés suggest that the management, for various reasons, had to recruit its company as desperately as Falstaff recruits his troops. There is no point in a catalogue of names. But among the few who show signs that they might have fulfilled their roles under a helpful director is Josef Sommer, as King Henry IV.

Which brings us to the director. Surely, of all plays, a Shakespearean play in production should convince us from start to finish of a design that, rightly or wrongly, was conceived as a way to fulfill the dramatist's design. Joseph Anthony has not provided this. There is only a series of effects, seemingly grabbed at as we go. Some of them are good, like Pistol's cavorting and like the ending, which fits the play's new title. But most of them are unfortunate. The riot at the attempted arrest of Falstaff is Metropolitan Opera staging of forty years ago. When an officer announces that Prince Hal and Poins are "near at hand," they are already on stage, so close to him in fact that he almost touches them with his baton. The six guards in the rebel camp—three

neatly on each side—turn, half-turn, and kneel simultaneously, like male Rockettes. And do on.

I did not see Anthony's production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at this theater last year; but the evidence on display here suggests that Shakespeare is not his forte.

Ed Wittstein has designed a center-stage device of four vertical beams, something like the elevator shaft in a building under construction, within and upon which scenic elements descend and rise. It is ingenious, but the results are sometimes clumsy. In the tavern scenes, entrances and exits have to be made by ladder.

A last sad note: the costumes are commonplace and the music is heavy. I cease.

***Murder in the Cathedral*, by T. S. Eliot (*New York Times*, 21 June 1966)**

At yesterday's matinee at the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut, this season's second play opened: *Murder in the Cathedral*, which is not by Shakespeare. T. S. Eliot's celebrated drama about Thomas Becket was written in 1935, and this production is good enough to test the play's power of theatrical survival.

In spite of a lot of mere poetical trappings, *Murder in the Cathedral* is still a work of some poetic force. After dollops of irrelevant opening verses by the Chorus of Women, after some portentous chitchat by four priests, the hero and the heroic theme arrive—and they hold us, most of the time, even if they do not profoundly move us. Unlike so many tragedies, which deal with a struggle to live or for principles in living, this is a drama of a martyr, struggling for the right death. ("I am not in danger: only near to death.") Becket knows he is to be killed by King Henry. He has come back to Canterbury and his cathedral to accept his death. Indeed, he is accused—justifiably—of desiring it.

Eliot's major theme—generally articulated at a calmly spacious level—is the nature of martyrdom, the simultaneous joy and grief that invigorate faith. Becket's Christmas sermon is a crystalline statement of the martyr's purpose. But there is another theme in the play, possibly more pertinent today and certainly of wider appeal: the ultimate validity of belief itself.

So far as the chorus itself has a function in *Murder in the Cathedral*, it is not, as Eliot maintained, to amplify the audience's reaction (this does not happen). The chorus symbolizes the world, the vast majority of people not concerned with ideals, not even capable of understanding them in others. Yet, to protect the souls of these people, the religious idealist must nonetheless strive and die. Thus the phrase "patron saint" takes on another meaning here, for Eliot's saint is even a little patronizing.

The essential historical facts of the story are now well known from Jean Anouilh's play *Becket* and the film of the same name. Eliot has concentrated on the end. In 1170 Becket returns from exile, knowing that he still has the King's enmity. Henry II thinks him disloyal because, after he made Becket the archbishop, his friend took the post seriously and refused to act as a fool. Four tempters appear, in a vision, to Becket, and three of them try to sway him to bend to Henry's rule. The fourth urges him to stick even more obdurately to his course and the glory in it. Becket rejects all of them, including the dream of sainthood as a motive: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason."

Four knights arrive, and Becket insists that the door be unbarred for them. Soon they murder him. Then—in one of the play's best scenes—they explain their



motives to the audience. (The audience is addressed several times during *Murder in the Cathedral*, and there are some purposely anachronistic lines in these addresses.) The knights' cases are so well made that they round out a theme stated earlier by the tempters: nothing is finally real. Under the eye of eternity, your belief is no truer than anyone else's belief; thus to die for an abstract belief, instead of accommodating oneself to a perceptible and achievable goal, is delusion or egotism. As such, "This man is obstinate. . . . / Passing from deception to deception. / From grandeur to grandeur to final illusion. / Lost in the wonder of his own greatness."

There is an interesting counterpoint between the two major themes—the priest's sure martyrdom and the doubting of absolutes—although, of course, history does not give the protagonist much chance to change his mind! But, roundabout this thematic contest, much of the writing—theatrically, at least—is mere upholstery in verse. It seems a relic of the belief that the way to make our theater poetic again is to imitate old poetic models.

Concerning the Stratford production itself, the movements of the chorus have been gracefully designed by the choreographer Pearl Lang, who has collaborated with John Houseman, the director. Barring a weakness for symmetry, Houseman has done his own work well. David Hays's low Romanesque arches, for their part, cloister the stage grimly. And Tharon Musser's lighting is imaginative, moving through the play like a silent comment.

As for the cast, the lines of the chorus are assigned to seven women, solo and together. They do their best, and Edith Meiser does a little better. Among the tempters and knights, some actors who were outstanding in the ASF production of *Falstaff* stand out again: Alexander Clark, Josef Sommer, Douglas Watson, and Patrick Hines. Becket is played by Joseph Wiseman and, overall, with welcome restraint. Wiseman's past acting has not always been free of baroque décor. The absence here of external effects heightens his new simplicity—particularly for those who have not seen him before. There is a measure of quiet nobility in his performance. (He speaks the Christmas sermon especially well.)

Essentially, however, Wiseman lacks the conviction of huge spiritual size that the play needs if it is to be both filled and fulfilled. Still, his performance is honest and capable enough to lift *Murder in the Cathedral* from page to stage; and to let us see that—winding through the production's puffy twentieth-century antiquarianism—there are some threads of persistent life.

### ***Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare (New York Times, 23 June 1966)**

Frank Hauser's reputation as a director has preceded him from England. There, since 1956, he has run the Oxford Playhouse (in the town, not the university) and has won praise as a producer of exceptional plays, new and old. Now, for the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut, Hauser has directed *Twelfth Night*, which opened yesterday evening, and the result is puzzling.

Not that this production disproves his reputation, but it certainly does nag at it. In the first scene I thought we were well away on a *Twelfth Night* of true poetic-fantastic quality. The look and style, the Orsino of John Cunningham, promised well. But then came the next scene and Hauser's Viola—who sounds as if she had just stepped off the Flatbush Avenue Express from Brooklyn. And then came the usually dependable Patrick Hines, playing the hearty Toby Belch—a role for which he is well suited—as if Toby were the slightly bibulous proprietor of a fashionable boutique

shop. *Then*, to complicate matters further, came Patricia Peardon playing Olivia with delicate comedy and a nice sense of the character's abstraction. Next came Richard Matthews, whom I have not previously admired, playing a quite acceptable, if slightly coarse-grained Feste, the jester. And, mixed in with some stiff staging seemingly left over from *Blossom Time*, the staging of the Malvolio scenes (with the upstart steward sharply played by Josef Sommer) had a sense of balance and thrust.

Will the real Frank Hauser please stand up?

For the eye, this is the most taking production so far in the Stratford season. Jane Greenwood has accepted the traditional Balkan touch in *Twelfth Night* costuming and has pursued it further—into the Middle East. The Turkish-Elizabethan combination is delightful. When Olivia hurries, we see golden harem trousers under her farthingale. Will Steven Armstrong has accommodated the mood with Moorish arches in his two-part permanent set, and so has Conrad Susa with his music. The very first sounds of the evening are some gentle taps on the tambourine.

The pleasant, unified effect of these design elements only underscores the odd contrasts in performance. The play is laid out clearly and moves swiftly enough, but it seems as if two directors had battled all through it and, therefore, both lost. In one and the same scene, we get Viola (played by Joan Darling) reading the "willow cabin" speech like a housewife putting a dishonest butcher in his place, along with Peardon's Olivia, all apt Illyrian charm.

Some modern critics have said that in his middle comedies, like *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare shows signs of gross social-climbing, trying to ingratiate himself with the aristocracy by mocking his own class, even by mocking social climbers. This is twentieth-century provincialism, I think; one might as well accuse him of being anti-democratic because he dedicated "Venus and Adonis" to the Earl of Southampton.

Still, when a director loses a firm grip on the light artifice of this comedy and allows it to fragment into literalness, *Twelfth Night* runs a risk of becoming for us what it was for Samuel Pepys 300 years ago: "a silly play."

### **Telling the Quasi-Truth (*New York Times*, 26 June 1966)**

Some years ago, after a particularly poor film opened in New York, the producers ran a large advertisement for which they could find only a single usable quotation from reviews. In immense type it read: "One of the better pictures of the week!" Besides laughing, I thought it was pathetically brave. And it was honest. Honesty—in this matter—is my subject.

I am not the first critic and will not be the last whose reviews have been distorted in quotation: but the subject is worth raising from time to time, in the hope of pumping out at least some of the bilge that is bound to seep in again. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty—and of deterring those who take liberties.

Every producer selects from published comment, and no one expects him to select unfavorable material. (Never mind the stunt ads that do so from time to time.) Often a wholeheartedly favorable comment occurs in a mixed or generally unfavorable review of a play (or book or film). The advertiser can, I think, use such a comment in good conscience if he feels he is honestly representing a plus element in a balanced or even negative account.

The matter is not strictly definable, but it gets less shadowy as one proceeds from the (perhaps) unintentionally deceptive to outright fraud. First, there is the matter of cast changes. A critic praises a production; then, sometimes only a few

weeks later, an important actor leaves the cast, thus signally altering the quality of the production. But the producer still advertises all the favorable comments on the production as such. Now it is not physically possible for the critic to re-review every play every time there is a significant change (and such “revisions” would be tedious to read, anyway). But his original comment no longer necessarily applies.

Or—to take an aspect that often pertains to revivals or to first New York productions of established works—the critic makes a favorable comment about the play itself, but has reservations about the production. “*Hamlet* is still a magnificent drama, but Sam Canby is inadequate in the title role.” The producer knows that the critic cannot deny that he called it “a magnificent drama.”

Sometimes, however, there is clear-cut, cool deception. For example, in my review of the Off-Broadway play *Undercover Man*, the last sentence referred to the scenery. I said: “The setting by Marc Gingold is an acceptable semblance of luxury, as the play is of sparkling comedy.” You have guessed it, of course. In other newspapers (it would not have been accepted in the *New York Times*) an advertisement quoted the phrase “sparkling comedy” by itself. Reputable publications have standards of advertising acceptability, but it is simply beyond human power for one publication to police advertisements in respect to reviews from all other publications. The devious producer knows this.

And every critic knows that his review will be picked over for usable phrases. But he cannot write a full opinion and also simultaneously fence in advance with a slippery advertiser. It would be fatuous to say that ego is not involved here: no writer likes to see an opinion attributed to him that misrepresents him. But more important is the duping of the prospective audience.

What can the audience do? The producer has a business he naturally wants to promote, but how can audience members protect themselves from unprincipled self-interest? They are not going to keep files of reviews; insofar as they rely on advertisements, they are going to be influenced by what the advertiser quotes from disinterested parties.

There seems to me only one possible test, fallible but indicative: length. The longer a quotation is, the more likely it is to represent the writer’s true opinion. “Funny!” may mean only that the critic wrote, “Funny, how some producers distort quotations from reviews.”

Of course, if the producer has quoted the review accurately and if the playgoer then finds out that he disagrees with the opinion, he will need no advice on what to do. Every critic’s mailbag attests to that.

### ***The Birds*, by Aristophanes (*New York Times*, 1 July 1966)**

*The Birds* was written almost fifty years after the *Oresteia*, but the Aristophanes comedy seems much more remote than the Aeschylus trilogy—at least as both are performed at the Ypsilanti (Michigan) Greek Theater. Perhaps this is because, generally, comedy does not wear as well as tragedy; the latter depends less often on current reference and custom. But, specifically, *The Birds*, which opened last night at in Ypsilanti, is one of the Aristophanes comedies of diminished relevance. Some scholars call it his masterpiece, but that seems to be an opinion more tenable outside the theater—or perhaps it depends on the reputed lyric quality of the original Greek.

In this play two Athenians, weary of that city's taxes and various discomforts, seek out a bird that was formerly a man. Then they, too, become birds and organize the bird world to build a city—Cloudecuckoo-land—midway between heaven and earth. There they act as a customs barrier; they exact toll on prayers that rise from earth and want to reach heaven, and they prevent the gods from visiting mortal maids. The gods finally send a delegation to plead for peace on the bird-men's terms.

It is possible, of course, to make modern analogies with the idea of the "birds" who have been despised and who have come to power. Nothing is impossible to the really determined maker of analogies. For myself, I cannot see much contemporary pertinence. And the theatrical fact remains that the story is an initial amusing idea with little intrinsic dramatic progression, padded with a series of 2,000-year-old topical skits, which are not made much more interesting by being updated with beatniks and hipsters.

Music—a great deal of music—would help, but in Ypsilanti there is almost none. The director, Alex Solomos, has put the burden squarely and somewhat unfairly on his two leading comedians, Bert Lahr and Jack Fletcher, the Athenians. They are asked to carry the show. Along with thousands of others, I laugh as soon as Bert Lahr appears; and anything comic that he does subsequently, I take as a welcome dividend. Yet hard as Lahr works here, the dividends are few. He is still a destroyer of seriousness by his ultra-seriousness, a brave and erratic explorer in the land of polysyllables; but here he is trekking through dry country. Jack Fletcher, a tall and attractively giddy man, very adept at double-takes, keeps pace with Lahr, but the pace is too often slow.

Part of the trouble is the translation, which lacks a consistent tone. The program attributes the work to William Arrowsmith, but admittedly this production had bowdlerized his translation and certainly gagged it up. A good deal of the trouble seems attributable to Solomos, who directed the *Oresteia* so extraordinarily well for the Ypsilanti Greek Theater. There is a feeling of listlessness about the show; it lacks sufficient comic invention, and throughout there is a lack of tautness and precision. Possibly Solomos simply was tired by his work on Aeschylus.

But also, I think, part of the trouble is the play itself. A bright burlesque director with a freshet of physical gags might make the work amusing—and possibly this would be fulfilling the spirit of Aristophanes. But even if such a staging were successful, it would be artificial respiration applied to a comedy that does not seem in itself to be alive and theatrically kicking.

It is pity that this new festival does not have two equally good productions. But at least in its first year it has come up with one generally fine production. There are festivals closer to home—to New York City—and a decade older that have not done as much.

### **Say It with Music, But Say It (*New York Times*, 17 July 1966)**

The number of musicals on Broadway last season was thirteen, a fact to make the superstitious gloat: because none of them was first-class and few of them were enjoyable. I thought that *Superman* was the best of the lot, and since some eyebrows (and brickbats) have been raised at this opinion, I might explain how I reached it.

To start at the bottom, there were two musicals that were so disastrous that one's dislike gave way to embarrassment. *Anya* and *Pousse-Café* were probably not the worst musicals in modern times, but they tried hard to be. Working our way up,

we come to *A Time for Singing*, which had the subject for a good serious-sentimental show—Richard Llewellyn’s 1939 novel *How Green Was My Valley* (filmed in 1941 by John Ford). But its lifeless score and clumsy book, together with some vulgarities of performance, nailed it to its Welsh valley floor. For its part, Alan Jay Lerner’s *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* seemed a sad triumph of idiosyncrasy over experienced judgment, while *Skyscraper* brushed lightly past Elmer Rice’s play *Dream Girl* on its way to a mechanical flatness that was only occasionally relieved.

*Sweet Charity* itself does not brush past Fellini’s film *The Nights of Cabiria*—it runs into and through it like an old-time quick-change artist. This musical comes out on the other side as a perfect item for a salt-free diet, but a dangerous one for diabetics. Gwen Verdon performs expertly, begging both figuratively and literally for love, and Bob Fosse has designed a few excellent numbers. Yet no matter how long this show runs, for me it will still be on its out-of-town tryout tour, waiting for a sparked-up book and some good new music.

The show that has brought a fervent Parnassian glow to many eyes is *Man of La Mancha*, a compote of *Don Quixote* and of Cervantes’ biography. To me it absolutely exemplifies the digest version that can make people think they have experienced a gigantic classic without straining their everyday comfy feelings and thoughts. The Don has been put to pasture in the sweet grass of latter-day Rodgers and Hammerstein country, except that there are a few remarkably tasteless dances involving the one major female character, Dulcinea—the show’s only chance for sex. But there are two unassailably fine elements in it. Howard Bay’s lighting and scenery show us at last how the downtown ANTA (American National Theater and Academy) space can be beautifully used. Richard Kiley’s performance in the dual role of Don and author is extraordinarily fine, with a delicate and just use of romantic acting style.

If Detroit went into show business, the product of the assembly line might be *Mame*—serviceable, slick, but much like many other serviceable assembly-line products. This musical version of Patrick Dennis’s 1955 novel (filmed in 1958) and Lawrence and Lee’s 1956 Broadway play—all three called *Auntie Mame*—has winning performances by Angela Lansbury and Frankie Michaels and a winning acid performance by Beatrice Arthur; and it is luxuriously produced. But the book is simple a re-routing of a hit play down Melody Lane, and most of Jerry Herman’s songs are straight from the die-stamp. This does not mean they are bad; it means that they are straight from the die-stamp.

All of the above (there were others: the list is not complete) were sentimental musicals. In varying ways, their principal aim was the heart-tug. They were devoid of comedy—especially *Mame*.

This leaves *Superman*. Its book is tied together toward the end with almost visible string, but at least one can say of it that it was conceived from an authentically witty viewpoint and has some witty, satirical purposes in view. (Its hero is by no means identical in character with his comic-book original.) Indeed, the show has about it some air of freshness and creativity. The songs are pleasant, and a few of them (such as “You’ve Got Possibilities”) can be listened to more than once. And it has Jack Cassidy and Linda Lavin in leading roles. The attempt in *Superman* to *do* something with its materials, rather than simply dust them off and sell them again, plus the relative level of success in the attempt, made this the best musical of the season for me.

Among revues—which in strict terminology are not musicals because they have no books—two were noteworthy. *Wait a Minim!* is a generally delightful concert

of folk songs by a generally South African troupe with interludes of generally soggy skits and sketches. The satirical *Mad Show* (Off-Broadway) was possibly the most consistently unboring musical entertainment of the season; but its effect was so very closely tied to its small cast that one could call it the best of the year only by referring to the original cast—or by checking it every time there was a cast change.

I am not suggesting in the above that a musical must be satirical to be good. There have been, after all, such disparate and memorable items as *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*, which relied hardly at all on satire and not preponderantly on comedy of any kind. I do suggest that a musical ought to convey some *raison d'être*—and more of a *raison* than that a profitable property is getting one more squeeze through the wringer. Our musical theater of the past season was less filled with music than with the sound of carpenters refitting old vehicles for new voyages. The carpentry has been good or less good; the felling of freshness, vigor, point has been weak—except for *Superman*.

The American musical is supposed to be our chief contribution to dramatic form and Broadway's chief skill. Say it with music then, but for pity's sake *say* something.

***Stephen D.*, by James Joyce & Hugh Leonard (*New York Times*, 5 August 1966)**

Any dramatization of a great novel is, in effect, two plays—one for those who know the book and another for those who don't. (With a lesser novel, the split is not so wide because the book's hold on those who know it is less.) An adapter has to satisfy both audiences at once. I doubt that Hugh Leonard succeeds with either in *Stephen D.*

Leonard, an Irish playwright and critic, has drawn a play from James Joyce's autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (and from Joyce's earlier draft of that book, *Stephen Hero*). Leonard's version was produced in Dublin in 1962 and in London a year later. Last night it had its American premiere at the Olney Theater in Maryland.

For one who knows the novel, the play is mostly a series of quotations and living pictures. Some lines are recalled, some scenes are "illustrated" with actors. But there is nothing like the specific gravity of the original. *Stephen D.* is like a syllabus summary of Joyce presented in the form of conventional theatrical devices. For one who doesn't know the novel, the play will (I assume) seem one more story of a young man—no, a young Irishman—reminiscing tenderly about childhood and adolescence as he realizes he has outgrown this environment and must leave it. (Since Joyce spent most of his life on the Continent, the Leonard version might be called *Trieste, Here I Come!*)

Every word, as far as I could tell, is from Joyce; so the dialogue has pith and pungency that are stratospheres above the ordinary, and the narrator's monologues are studded with some of the pearls of twentieth-century prose. But the net effect of this adaptation is thin. For any viewer, whether or not he knows Joyce, the chief lack is depth in Stephen's character, conviction of his intellectual growth. Rather suddenly, for example, in the second of two acts, he shows interest in Ibsen. Joyce's careful depiction in the novel of the awakening of Stephen's mind, of his highly personal ordering of art, is thus weakly conveyed. The hero's famous final declaration is one of the great statements of an artist's intent. (He will rely for his defense, he says, on

“silence, exile, and cunning.”). But this is much too fiercely perceptive a statement for Leonard’s Stephen.

The story, as such, has some elemental interest: the boy growing up in the Dublin of the 1889s and 1890s, seeing the Parnell crisis through a child’s eyes, beginning to taste liberation with his college chums. The stuffiness of his parochial education and his puritanical repressions are graphically rendered; but where is the young Prometheus wrenching himself from the rock? This Stephen is a familiar college agnostic. Partly this is because there is no remotest approximation in dramatic technique of the level of technique in the novel. A novelistic masterpiece is here rendered in theatrically trite terms, beginning with the grown Stephen, then launching into flashback, with Stephen at the side speaking the lines of his younger selves. And then—possibly with a bow to some fancied theatrical necessity—the play dwells heavily on the family-circle pathos that is only one element in the astringent novel.

With the aid of a treadmill and moving platforms, James D. Waring has staged the play with fluency, except for some strolls up and down the center aisle. (Can’t we have a moratorium for a while on actors in the audience? They are always exactly that—actors in the audience.) Waring has also designed the scenic elements, which are flavorful, and the lighting, which is adequate.

Some of his players give fine portrayals, especially Kate Harrington as orthodox old Dante and Richard Curnock as a hell-fire preacher (the only two in the cast who sound unassailably Irish). Roy R. Scheider has the jauntiness of a mock-serious student, and Benjamin Hess Slack has some heated moments as a hot patriot. As Stephen himself, however, George Grizzard is miscast. Most of the time he does not sound Irish, which is harmful to the play’s tonality. But, even more important, his Stephen is only a wistful, pouty, lackadaisical young fellow. The growing vision of estrangement, and the acceptance of it, are not in him. A burning-cold poetic portrayal might have compensated for the watery dramatization; but Grizzard does not supply it.

In the end, the question is: Why? It is not a law of the cosmos that great novels must be dramatized. Why should it ever be done unless the dramatization can get the book’s quintessence on the stage or give us added insight or at least provide arresting performances? Almost all that is valuable in this production is in Joyce himself, without benefit of theater, and this fact makes *Stephen D.* a disappointment.

### **Can the Theater Do Any Good? (*New York Times*, 7 August 1966)**

A visit to old New England raises an old question: Can drama that wants to do good really do it?

In the Arena Theater of Tufts University outside Boston I saw the first presentation of this year’s selection by the American Playwrights’ Theater. The APT is not a theater *per se*—it is a service organization sponsored by the American Educational Theater Association, the American National Theater and Academy, and Ohio State University. It selects one new play each year by an established playwright: a play that has not been produced in New York and is made available to educational and community theaters for production by them. This year’s selection is *And People All Around*, by George Sklar.

Sklar is remembered for his plays in the 1930s, written alone and in collaboration. One of his works was the first production by the Theater Union, another was the last production by the Federal Theater Project. Now, after a silence of

twenty years, he has written a play based on the murder of three civil rights workers—two white and one black—in Mississippi two years ago.

About this play there is, unfortunately, not much to be said. It is sententious in structure and cardboard in character; and the dialogue spends much of its time in rather obviously trying to avoid cliché. The hero is a Southerner who eventually takes a stand against his fellow-townsmen and whose predictable crisis is stretched on the rack of a trite love story. In short, all the play's vaunted seriousness is in its subject, not in itself as a play. Its chief interest is symptomatic; it marks a turn of the calendar. *And People All Around* is an example of the school which felt that, if a subject was of pressing social or political importance, a play had to be written about it. (Odd how the past tense slips into this description.) The first consideration was not whether there was really a valid play in the subject or whether the writer had anything to add—in any way—to what was generally known. The existence of the problem, in itself, was the imperative for dramatization.

Sklar's drama makes clear that the past thirty years have had the contradictory effect of narrowing and heightening the theater's functions. The function of informing—never one of the theater's strong points—has been stripped from it. Few people have ever gone to the theater to learn facts. The truth is that social-action plays were generally attended by audiences who already knew the facts, were frustrated by them, and got some temporary relief through the mass arousals of the theater. But even that relief is missing today in the "message" play, as it can still be called.

When I saw Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* in 1935, for example, I felt, along with others, that I had struck some sort of blow by yelling "Strike!" at the end. When I saw Sklar's play, I felt, along (I think) with others, somewhat irritated by its assumptions about me; and I don't think that the difference is merely the difference in my age. I doubt that the equivalent of that 1935 audience still exists, in simplicities of hope and (therefore) in acceptances of propagandistic art. (Which is not to say that Odets was no better than Sklar.) For today's audience, a melodrama of race struggle remains, despite its worthy intent, a melodrama.

There may perhaps be some sort of existential therapy in being an actor in this play in certain situations (the next production will be in Texas), but what can it do for its audiences? The very fact of their presence—particularly at college and community theaters—would argue at least some quality in them that renders the play itself superfluous. And even if there are some in the audience whose views are opposed to Sklar's and ours, can we believe that this play will change them? (Does anyone seriously believe that many German productions of *The Diary of Anne Frank* converted German anti-Semites?) This utilitarian aspect of the theater has always been dubious. The name of Bertolt Brecht inevitably arises in discussing it. At his didactic worst, Brecht tried utilitarianism and failed. At his best, he tried it and again failed—only to succeed in a quite different, more traditionally artistic way.

Well, then, can't the theater do any good? My answer would be: no—not in anything like the spoonful-of-medicine approach. The very flood of information that is available to anyone likely to go to a theater has washed away the need or even the tolerability of such an approach. Yet there is a gap between social conditions and necessary social actions. Can the theater do anything to help bridge that gap? Yes; and it is here that I think its function has heightened. By turning its back on literalness, the theater of social import can serve as sustenance and stimulus. What is needed from that theater is irony, imagination, poetry, rational hope: not familiar fact festooned with plot contrivance, wishful thinking, and a chorus of authorial mouthpieces.



Commenting recently on poems that were read at a meeting of writers to protest the Vietnam War, the poet Stanley Kunitz, a politically engaged man, said: "One of the things I noticed was that the poets who . . . made a frontal attack on the whole problem of the war came off rather badly. . . . And in general . . . those who were a little more oblique or indirect, who did not make a public declaration, actually had more to say that was meaningful." Much in this statement can be applied to plays of social concern—especially that there are two "oblique" things that the theater can do to make an audience more responsive to the means of direct action outside the theater.

It can pry off surfaces, puncture pomposities (including our own), ridicule ridiculousness. The best satire, including cabaret satire, has been doing thus. And the theater can dramatize origins, large relationships, underlying significance. Melville's *Benito Cereno*, as rendered for the stage by Robert Lowell, reveals more about the forces that produced the Mississippi murders than any propaganda play could approach. The Living Theater production of Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig* started with some facts about a United States Marine prison and transmuted them into a metaphysical, universally pertinent experience.

The stock phrase tells us that the artist cannot compete with headlines. This only makes me more grateful for the availability of headlines. In a world replete with facts from press and television and films, the artist concerned with social problems now has all the more freedom to concentrate on his art. The social dramatist can give up the goal—delusory, I think—of being simplistically useful, in order to be exploratory, uncertain, irreverent, paradoxical. And thus he may help us to the provocative social theater that, in the midst of all these facts, we badly need—and that George Sklar's *And People All Around* itself does not provide.

### ***Company*, by Stephen Sondheim (*New Republic*, 23 May 1970)**

Boris Aronson is seventy—probably the oldest scenic designer now active in the American theater. This is much more than a moist-eyed Grand Old Man note because his setting for *Company* is marvelous. Aronson's styles have ranged, through his career, from the naturalism of *Awake and Sing!* to the abstraction of *J.B.*, but for *Company* he has made a setting quite unlike any of his work that I know. It is a skeletonized structure of (seeming) Plexiglas and steel with two open elevators in it and a huge cyclorama behind it on which rear projections flow past to supplement or specify the action. Yet this is no mere stack of boxes like Robin Wagner's set for the recent feeble production of *Mahagonny*. Aronson's setting *dramatizes* the cellular, scarily clean feeling of a modern Manhattan apartment house, including a touch of wit and a lot of good, varied playing spaces. Like so much that is new, the basic concept is a fresh use of the not-new. The mode is Constructivist and suggests the influence of two Russians, the sculptor Tatlin and the director-designer Meyerhold. (Aronson was born in Russia and lived there until he was twenty-three, so possibly knew their work first-hand.)

I dwell on the setting because, first, it is excellent, and second it is the best element in *Company*, and third, I'm convinced that, in a decisive way, it "makes" the show. The ultra-hip tone of *Company* rests on the work of this seventy-year-old designer.

The music and lyrics are by Stephen Sondheim. His lyrics are, again, good, as they were in *West Side Story* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*;

his music is, again (as in *Forum*), acute in rhythmic ingenuity and combination, weak in melodic invention. The book by George Furth is about a bachelor of thirty-five and five married couples, his friends, in the same house. The hero has a long scene with each of the couples, which is the bulk of the show, and the defect at the core of the book is that he is only a roving reporter. At the very end a number called "Being Alive" is slapped on his role to convince us that something has really happened to the protagonist, but the effort only emphasizes that this is not true. Further, he is a pallid character. The author—with an old device—keeps having people say how interesting the hero is and how much they like him, but it doesn't help. Dean Jones, who plays the part, doesn't help much either.

And what does the hero observe among his friends? Five utterly trite mod-marriage situations, four of which are just that—static situations. Only one of them has some drama in it—a girl reluctant to marry the man she lives with—and the ending of that scene is phony. There was more slick comment about mod marriage in the first half-hour of *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*, a film I found vaguely repellent in its pleasure with itself, than in all of *Company*.

All criticism of a show like this is supposed to contain, or imply, the phrase "for a musical." The book is unconventional "for a musical." It is candid f. a. m. It is bitter f. a. m. But in return for that concession, we are supposed to get some use of the attributes of the musical: flights of imagination, enrichment through music and dance of what would be verbalized complexly in a "straight" play. Well, Harold Prince's staging of *Company* is fairly bright and some of the dancing is nice, but the "lift" of the really good musical is only occasionally there. The best numbers are two 1930s parodies. The worst is one they have put in for Elaine Stritch, who is once more giving her monstrously predictable wise-guy performance. She has a song called "The Ladies Who Lunch," about conspicuously consuming beauty-salon patrons—sheer 1927 Helen Hokinson caricature in a 1970 atmosphere.

So the equation of the "for a musical" formula is not fulfilled in *Company*. One can say of *Pal Joey* that it is biting social comment f. a. m., but the best comment in this new show, and the best use of the musical's freedom from literalism, is Boris Aronson's setting.

### ***Hedda Gabler*, by Henrik Ibsen (*New Republic*, 22 July 1972)**

When it is good, it is very, very good; when it is bad, it is at its usual level. Americans tend to imagine a glory about the London theater that, as a level, simply does not exist. We need to shed our theatrical inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* London. Broadway is no worse than the West End. In some ways, it is preferable.

The English exceptions are treasures. Last year I saw a production of Gorky's *Enemies* by the Royal Shakespeare Company under David Jones that was beautiful. This year, amidst a lot of trash, another treasure: the Royal Court production of *Hedda Gabler* as adapted by John Osborne, with Jill Bennett (Mrs. Osborne), directed by Anthony Page.

Alan Tagg has designed a setting, lighted by Andy Phillips, that transforms the small Royal Court stage into a large Nordic nineteenth-century mausoleum. Osborne has rendered Ibsen as he should have done: which is to say, he has not wrenched the play to fit a theory or serve as hobby-horse, he has simply seared the dialogue into language that shows why he admires the play and was attracted to it. This is urgent, *useful* theater writing. For instance, after Hedda has offended her husband's

aunt about her hat, she says, “These things just seem to wait for me to do them.”

The line is not only a sample of Osborne’s diction, it is a clue to Hedda and to Jill Bennett’s performance. (She is best-known in the U.S. through her film performances: as the aunt with the heart attack in Bette Davis’s *The Nanny*, as Trevor Howard’s lady friend in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.) This Hedda comes in finished, though only subconsciously aware of it, gliding airily to an end that is in her own nature and of her own doing. Some of the London critics complained that Bennett’s performance was not tragic, but *Hedda Gabler* is not a tragedy, it is the *dénouement* of a tragedy. Gooses were cooked long before the curtain rises. Hedda never tries to change her life, to pry herself free, to leave her husband or take up again with Løvborg. She simply toboggans down the slope on which she has already started, and vindictively—she would say idealistically—takes Løvborg with her.

The *prior* tragedy is essentially one of gender. Hedda has the impulses and imagination of a man—romantic but male—in a society that provides no place for a woman but the conventional one. Her father, the General, is often mentioned; her mother never. Her father’s pistols (phallic symbols, need one point out?) are pivotal in the story. Her frigidity, her boredom, her loathing of her pregnancy, her terrible vengeance, are all unwitting functions of a biological doom that has condemned her to a role for which she is not psychologically or temperamentally fitted. This production even suggests, quite aptly, a lesbian touch toward Mrs. Elvsted. All these matters Jill Bennett encompasses admirably.

For American theatergoers, who recently had Claire Bloom’s inept Hedda visited upon them, here are a few comparisons to help make matters vivid. Bloom was a petulant, grown-up schoolgirl, striving for glacier force; Bennett is gracious, humorous, easy with superficial facets that contrast ironically with her depths. Bloom strove pathetically to be commanding; Bennett never bothers—her rich voice, her lynx-like presence allow her, figuratively, to do as she pleases yet never lose us. Bloom wanted not to lose our sympathy: Bennett doesn’t care if we hate Hedda—she seems to understand that what Ibsen is after is something larger than having us like a star; he wants us to loathe a certain world, the one that made her.

Ronald Hines is a perfect Tesman: we can understand how Hedda might have slipped into marriage with him. Brian Cox, the Løvborg, plays with a hulking Marlon Brando solidity, rather than the usual poeticizing ethereal quality in the role. Denholm Elliott, long a favorite of mine, plays Judge Brack like a sadistic surgeon.

Anthony Page’s direction bothered me at the outset, with its linear, angular movements and compositions, often quite neatly parallel with the footlights. Then these patterns began to suggest the corsets and stays of this society. At only one point would I quarrel: he has Hedda downstage of Brack when he tells her of Løvborg’s suicide. The focus should be on her, not on Brack. As is, she has a difficult time controlling the moment.

Bennett has a few other tonal difficulties toward the end. But if she doesn’t quite fulfill the desperate self-immolation feeling, she has been so captivating until then that we are willing to rationalize on her behalf: perhaps Hedda is so trapped in a mingy world that large-size Medea movements are impossible even at the finish.

### ***The Hot l Baltimore*, by Lanford Wilson (*New Republic*, 14 April 1973)**

*The Hot l Baltimore* fails. (The title, which sets both the tone and level of the play, represents a hotel sign from which the first “e” is missing.) This is *utilized*

naturalism, reworking a wearily familiar Tennessee Williams vein. The writer looks at social outcasts with what is presented as boundless compassion but is really a tried-and-true theater formula. If you have a mediocre talent and apply it to eccentrics and to the world's despised, it makes your talent look larger, to some.

Lanford Wilson's play deals with a cross-section of characters in a dowdy hotel, including (surprise!) three whores—one fat, one aging, one young and dreamy—and a young man on a Quest, who has strayed in from Williams' *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, *Small Craft Warnings*, etc. He is devout in his Quest until the playwright doesn't need him anymore, when he quits and leaves.

It's all passably directed by Marshall Mason and passably acted. (I saw it in an Upper Broadway upper-floor theater; because of critical acclaim, it's been moved to a theater on Bleecker Street.) But every moment is dramatically stale and most of it strains for "heart," one more squeezing of the grapes of Loneliness.

I used to have hopes for Wilson because, though his talent was always small, he had some honest intent toward honest observation. But this play, pretending to face life unflinchingly, only dispenses theatrical syrup—which, by the way, drips very slowly.

***In the Boom Boom Room*, by David Rabe (*New Republic*, 1 December 1973)**

Joseph Papp has now presented his first new production in the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, and, allowing for the fact that it bears the extra burden of being his first work there, it is still a very discouraging début. *In the Boom Boom Room* is the fourth play by the young American David Rabe, all of which Papp has produced. The first three range from the spottily good to the dreadful: *Sticks and Bones*, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, and *The Orphan*. This new play is a semi-realistic, semi-expressionist work about a Philadelphia go-go girl, daughter of a casual criminal father and a vapid mother, sexual prey of dozens of men, how she got that way, and how she declines to a new nadir. (In Rabe's vocabulary, this means going topless in New York.)

The theme, the ravaging of a female social-sexual victim, is so familiar that one *counts* on the familiarity, in a way: one assumes that the author would never have chosen it unless he was convinced he had new insights or an artistic vision of the subject that in itself would afford new insights. (Which is what Barbara Loden had in her excellent, comparable film *Wanda*.) Not so. Not Rabe. Clearly, one can say after the fourth experience of him, his notion of playwriting is to get a clever device, impressively flashy, then just fill in the rest of the play as needed. Previously he has used old German expressionist, anti-militarist dream techniques; or a blind Vietnam veteran with an invisible Vietnamese girlfriend in his Midwest home; or a combination of the Oresteia myth with My Lai and Charles Manson. After these initial gimmicks, he seems to have said, who could question my gravity or power?

Some can—even after his new gimmick. He puts *Boom Boom Room* in a multiple set, with six large gilded cages hanging from the roof, rope ladders going up to each. At the start five go-go girls come out and climb to the cages. From time to time, they writhe, comment, come down, and do numbers with their leader; but their real purpose is to show that Rabe is theatrically brilliant. I didn't feel I needed them around continuously to emphasize the heroine's sex-object fate; it was Rabe who needed them.

Because without that flashy device, it would have become clear quickly that

an adolescent intellect was pompously restating what all of us over fourteen know: that he has padded these social-characterological clichés with torturous fake-emotional ramblings, peopled his play with stereotypes (the three principal men are a shy clerk, a truck driver, and a homosexual), and has lolled in long detours of reminiscence that are like plastic Chekhov. And besides studding his dialogue with old jokes, he keeps re-using a stale naturalistic dialogue device. Someone is talking about subject A, suddenly interpolates something about B (as if in a sting of memory), then continues with A; finishes that; pauses, then wistfully returns to B. In Rabe's heavy hands, it becomes a vaudeville formula.

Santo Loquasto's scene design tries to grapple with the space problems of the Beaumont—he has even shifted the whole stage to one side—but he hasn't lost the converted-gym feeling of the place. The cast is mostly deplorable, although Charles Durning is adequate in the easy role of the father. Madeline Kahn, who was the cooch dancer in the film *Paper Moon*, is a competent small-part actress; here, as the heroine, she is smothered in an immense part, full of climaxes that are ungrounded in the role and that have to be pumped up rhetorically. I thought that Kahn would collapse before the long evening ended, that oxygen would be needed.

The play was directed by Julie Bovasso, one of the arch amateurs of Off-Off Broadway, who left before the opening; her job was taken over by Papp. He ought never to direct. Whatever other abilities he may have, directing—I can say after fifteen years of watching him—is not one of them.

### **National Repertory Theater (*New Republic*, 6 December 1975)**

The problem of repertory is here to plague us again. I put this in no smart-aleck vein—I spent ten early years of my life in such a group—but it's hard to see the subject as anything but a problem. Ideally, true repertory (which most so-called repertory companies today are not) is the perfect system for actors. They have the chance to play several roles in a season and to “come back” to each role during the season with refreshment. But theaters do not exist for theater people. The reason that opera and ballet companies still use repertory is the same reason that the theater today does not: audience interest. Translated, this reads “economics.” If there were sufficient audience for “runs” of opera and ballet, that would pretty much be the end of *their* repertory system. Theater audiences are now accustomed, in a metropolis, to choosing among theaters, not among plays in one theater. It's quite irritating, for us today, to want to see a show and find that the theater won't have it back for weeks. (Happened to me in London last summer, with the National and the Royal Shakespeare.)

Outside the biggest cities, repertory makes more sense, but then only on tour. A company resident in a city with, say, a three-week audience for each play, is wiser to play six plays for three weeks each than to put on all six in the first three weeks and then shuffle them for the rest of the season. (Anything else is solipsistic from the actors' view.) A company that *visits* that city for three weeks is of course better off with a repertory of six choices instead of one.

The whole social-cultural drift is against repertory. Union rules make it costly. Employment opportunities for actors are much more varied than in the high repertory days, and seduce them out of any permanence in the company (one of the real reasons for the system). Also, and important, American audiences have been conditioned to expect prominent virtuosos or, at least, personalities in a cast, rather than an ensemble

of putatively equal merit and blended personalities.

In this inimical atmosphere, the Acting Company (formerly known as the City Center Acting Company) has had the courage to try. They are now the only widely touring repertory group in the United States. They have recently finished a five-week stand in New York City that was only one item on a year-round crowded schedule. After three years of touring the Acting Company has played in ninety-two cities in thirty states, in many places more than once. By the standard of national availability they are the only national theater we have, so their condition must be of general concern.

Further, they come as close as any contemporary group to being a true repertory company. Most of their members were trained at the same theater school, Juilliard, at the same time, class of 1972, and have remained together since they played together in school. John Houseman, head of Juilliard's Drama Division and now artistic director of the Company, had the idea of consolidating his first graduating class into a continuing company. They now claim a repertory of eighteen works, which means, I assume, that any of the eighteen could be done by the group on relatively short notice. They perform any one season's roster of plays in alternation. Among the numerous American theaters that call themselves repertories, few can cite such continuity of ensemble and accrual of resources.

I saw the Company's first production (well schooled in several senses of the word, as directed by Michael Kahn), Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, before they left Juilliard. I saw two more productions in their first New York season: Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* and the Paul Shyre adaptation of Dos Passos' *U. S. A.* I deliberately stayed away from them in their last New York season, 1973, in order to get some perspective. This season I saw all four of their shows.

The first was *The Robber Bridegroom*, a musical adapted from Eudora Welty's novella by Robert Uhry (book and lyrics) and Robert Waldman (music). Unfortunately, the adaptation fit the original well, catching its *ersatz* folkloric quality and exaggerating it only a little. This romantic tale of Mississippi in the early nineteenth century was fleshed out on stage with all the balladic false naïveté of Welty's piece. The music disintegrated on the way from the stage to our ears. The production looked like rube sketches for the "Carol Burnett Show." Douglas W. Schmidt, the Company's designer, who had done some good work at the Vivian Beaumont, showed here—as he did again later—the budget restrictions on him. The director Gerald Freedman filled the stage with cooked-up natural heartiness. The cast sang and danced somewhat better than one might expect of straight actors, and Kevin Kline in the title role sometimes touched the sweep of romance. Patti LuPone as his sweetheart cartooned brightly her swoonings and raptures. I liked David Schramm as her father until two weeks later I saw him pull out almost the same performance in Saroyan. Mary Lou Rosato, as the girl's stepmother, showed in the first thirty seconds that three years' experience have only given her three years' confirmation in the hollow stage trickery she felt so proud of last time I saw her.

Next came Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*. The publicity said that this was the play's "first full-scale American production." I saw it last year at the CSC Repertory in New York (a less glamorous group that, too, is trying for true repertory): their production certainly seemed as full in scale as the Acting Company's, though possibly not entirely professional in the strict Equity union sense, and I certainly enjoyed it more than this show. But no performance of *Edward II* can

really succeed because it's not a successful play. The writing is not nearly as rich as that of *Tamburlaine* or *Doctor Faustus*, and there is no protagonist of interest. Gaveston has some foxy glitter but he disappears early; Edward himself is one long declining petulant whine; his queen and her friend Mortimer alter, they don't develop. (Even the well-acted Prospects Theater production, televised in New York by PBS, couldn't sustain interest.) Ellis Rabb, the director, apparently thought of the play as flowing sculpture. Faces were painted with statuary silver highlights, the costumes (by Nancy Potts) looked like late Eisenstein, movement was virtually continuous and sinuous. (Likewise the music by Bob James.) There was much banner-waving in lieu of scenery—the scenic reliance was on David F. Segal's lighting within black drapes—and the general intent seemed to be sleight-of-hand: if we keep things flowing and unfurling, with music behind it all, maybe we can make people believe it's highly dramatic.

The main reason for the revival of *Edward II* (I've now seen it three times in one year—enough for a lifetime) is apparently the new permissiveness about homosexuality: relations between Edward and Gaveston can now be treated frankly. But frankness doesn't make Marlowe's play any better than it has made others, and the Edward (Norman Snow) and Gaveston (Peter Dvorsky) were two-dimensionally unhelpful. The Company's best woman, Mary-Joan Negro, had some appeal in her early scenes as the Queen, but Negro has a touch of the fishwife in her speech and movement that progressively interfered. The Company's best man—best actor of all—Sam Tsoutsouvas, provided the only strength as rebellious Mortimer. Tsoutsouvas has a real theater voice, a sense of address and line, and real discrimination in the “choices” he makes all through a performance.

After *Edward II* came one of the worst directed shows I have ever seen in a “full-scale professional” production, the Company's rendition of William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*. The execrable director was Jack O'Brien. Ludicrous clumsiness marked the movement, absence of any Saroyan mood marked the tone. The play itself is increasingly dubious fare except as a vehicle for a Joe capable of barroom glamour and mystery. Nicholas Surovy, the Joe here, had none. Norman Snow, a grimacer—one who manufactures facial attitudes as instructed—grimaced some more as Tom, his sidekick. Rosato was unbearable as Mary L. Patti LuPone, who might have been good as Kitty Duval, the tart, was coarse and unaffected. I blame the director because LuPone had been at least adequate in her previous work for the Company. Schramm gave us more of his *Robber Bridegroom* rustic as Kit Carson. I found it very hard to sit through this production.

Their performance of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* was minimally better—it was better directed by Boris Tumarin—but because of the difference in the stature of the plays, it was even harder to sit through. Rosato's Olga was all surface. LuPone's Irina was a rough sketch for a performance that, in a better environment, might thrive. Negro's Masha had occasional flashes of validity but not the requisite depth, and again the fishwife peered through occasionally. Tsoutsouvas, the Solyony, was excellent. The best of the others, Vershinin and Andrei, were at passable drama-school level. The play began, continued, and ended; but Chekhov was very far away.

The Acting Company proves that the practice of repertory, utterly laudable as such, is no guarantee of quality, not even of movement *toward* quality. The actors are more experienced than when I first saw them, but in no substantive way are they better. There are, in my view, some reasons. They don't develop, individually and as an ensemble, because there is no director: there are numerous directors, a new one for

almost every show. (Of the work by the other directors I've seen, Kahn is competent, Anne McNaughton, who did *U. S. A.*, is not, and Gene Lesser showed in *The Hostage* that he is already a specialist in *ersatz* brio.) In theater history the best companies have developed under one director or under a very few directors of like mind and talent. Further, this group is enslaved by the big part/small part alternation idea that allegedly is a cornerstone of repertory. (It isn't.) What was gained by wasting Tsoutsouvas as the pinball player in *The Time of Your Life*? Surovy will never be right in the role of Joe, and Tsoutsouvas might at least have made the play endurable.

Also the group seems to have misguided loyalties. They need better actors. They need to drop some and acquire others. The exercise of repertory will not, it now seems clear, improve some of them. (Are promising subsequent graduates of Juilliard being recruited?) Devotion to repertory and to touring is essential and admirable, but insufficient. None of these four productions is good, and with the relatively better ones—Marlowe and Chekhov—the cold consolation is the abstract knowledge that they are part of a plan, that these actors did something else last night and will do something else tomorrow. But one's happiness about forms of theater organization is limited by the instance on view at the moment.

The Acting Company is widely and eagerly booked. This is good news in the sense that it affirms the existence of a theater audience throughout this country and the growth of interest in the repertory idea. But that audience deserves better than what this group is giving them or shows promise of giving them. On the basis of the productions of theirs that I have seen, I think it fair to say that such a company does much to underscore the problem of repertory but nothing to solve it. The tacit appeal throughout is "Give us a chance to grow." Only in the theater do performers think they have a right to ask audiences to invest time, let alone money, to watch them beginning so far back. The Acting Company thus marches across the continent advancing the flag of—at their highest reach—mediocrity.

### ***California Suite*, by Neil Simon (*New Republic*, 3 July 1976)**

If there were no Neil Simon, Broadway would have to invent him. In fact, that's more or less what Broadway is now doing. His latest collection of sketches, at the O'Neill Theatre, is third-class Simon. The advance word from out-of-town and from New York previews was worried. But opening night came, the hoopla hooped, the Main Stem got wound, and a hit was born.

*Variety* said on its front page recently, "B'way Legit Never Had It So Good." But a glance at the details showed that bigger grosses were coming from fewer shows than in earlier years and that almost all those shows were musicals. Broadway means comedies as much as it means musicals, and there hadn't been an American hit comedy since *Same Time, Next Year*. And the Democratic convention was coming! The merchandise needed beefing up, and what better item for the shop than a new Simon show? And here it came—with, as further big-time blue ribbons, the same director and designers who had done *Same Time, Next Year*: Gene Saks with William Ritman for sets, Jane Greenwood for costumes, and Tharon Musser for lighting.

Everything's O.K. now. On the second night, when I attended, the audience knew beforehand that they were going to a hit, and they loved it beforehand—also during and after. There is no better instance of perfect community in our theater than that between a Broadway audience and a play that they have been told in advance is a hit—particularly if it's a comedy by Simon. Well, why shouldn't these amiable



people have a playwright who tickles them? I, equally amiable, ask only that he tickle me, too. He did it for me through much of *The Odd Couple* and *The Sunshine Boys*. When he fails to amuse and, worse, when he implies that there is Something Deep under his skits, both of which are the case here, his failure becomes a kind of offense.

*California Suite* is his Beverly Hills annex to *Plaza Suite*—four plays in the same hotel room—only not as bright the second time round. The first play is about a screenwriter (George Grizzard) and his ex-wife, a New York *Newsweek* editor (Tammy Grimes), and their argument about custody of their daughter. The second is about a man from Philadelphia (Jack Weston) trying to conceal a blonde, zonked out in his bed, from his newly arrived wife (Barbara Barrie). The third is about an English actress (Grimes) nominated for an Oscar, who arrives for the awards ceremony and whose loss helps to unite her with her bisexual husband (Grizzard). The last involves all four and is built on a tennis sprain.

The liveliest dialogue is in the first, which might be entertaining (a) if it had some point instead of an arbitrary decision by the wife just because Simon wants to finish the damned thing off; and (b) if Simon didn't sweat so hard to keep one jump ahead of us. For instance, the husband in this sketch is well aware of and anticipates the anti-California prejudices of New Yorkers, but this extra level—intended to show that this isn't just one more stale N.Y.-L.A. duel—leads us to expect some new insights on the subject: which are not there.

I got my only laughs from the second play, and then only because of Jack Weston. As he showed in *The Ritz*, this pudgy teddy bear with feet of clay is a very funny *farceur*. His range isn't wide, but at least he has some. The third play is Simonized Noël Coward—suddenly grave, daring, under the froth. Anyway, it helped me to answer the nagging question: Whom does Tammy Grimes look and sound like? Answer: Cyril Ritchard in drag. (George Grizzard, alas, is only himself.) Number Four is sheer bankruptcy. Example of its wit: Barrie keeps saying "Shit!" as her twisted ankle pains her, then, in order to sound genteel, she says "Defecation!"

Other than Weston's clowning, the only interesting thing is Saks's direction. He really understands the pacing, the *connections*, that this kind of comedy needs.

### ***Agamemnon*, by Aeschylus (New Republic, 9 July 1977)**

I saw Andrei Serban's *Agamemnon* twice at the Vivian Beaumont Theater. The second time, four weeks after my first visit, I sat on the stage, in one of the two bleacher sections that were moved about. I enjoyed it more than I thought I would: it was a fairly good approximation of following Serban's *Trojan Women* on foot, which I had done four times. At one point the bleachers were shoved far upstage, and I could see all the stage mechanisms behind the proscenium arch as I watched the Argive world in the center. This, paradoxically, helped. I got an added sense of immediate imaginative creation, rather than pretended actuality, as I watched Apollo descend and ascend in his cart and also saw the stagehands over against the wall tugging at Apollo's ropes.

What I had disliked in the production the first time, I disliked more intensely the second time—like the miming of the Trojan War and the bathtub murder of the king. The clean line of Aeschylus's play was certainly zigzagged by Serban. But the individual zigs and zags were well composed. And the (many) elements I had liked the first time, I liked even more.

As I had hoped, Jamil Zakkai, Agamemnon/Aegisthus, had firmed his grip on both roles. Some of Serban's best touches were even more thrilling the second time: e.g., the Watchman, who has spent years on the palace roof waiting for the signal of Troy's fall, beginning his speech in an immense stage whisper, then gradually finding his voice; the doubling of the Herald who tells the story of the victory—the role is done by two actors, one behind the Chorus Leader, one facing him, speaking in unison.

And, which I had praised but not enough, Priscilla Smith's Clytemnestra. (I regret even more deeply that she also plays Cassandra: the point of this completely eludes me.) The sheer *size* of Smith as the Queen, the size of the imagination and self and technique implied in her performance, soars. Soars. She made me think of Flagstad in the first act of *Tristan und Isolde*, in the passage that ends "*Rache! Tod! Tod—uns Beiden!*" Smith's Clytemnestra went through to the end in that vein—"the avenger, ancient in anger." I'll never forget it.

### **Squat Theater (*New Republic*, 3 December 1977)**

Squat Theater is devoted to one kind of construction in the theater, and a very rewarding one at that. They started in Budapest in 1970, where they played, for small audiences, in one another's homes and called themselves Apartment Theater. The company numbered thirteen when they emigrated from Hungary in 1976 and first played in Holland and England. Eleven of them came to the United States—two are in Paris awaiting visas—and here they changed the company's name because they were no longer playing in their homes. One of the group, Anita Koos, told me that they took their new name from American history, from the land-grant squatters of the nineteenth century and from Stevenson's *Silverado Squatters*.

I had read about their appearance at an avant-garde festival in Baltimore, and I went to see them recently when they were playing at Soho Books in lower Greenwich Village. The big bookshop had been bisected by curtains at right angles to the street, books on one side, theater space on the other. In most storefront theaters, the windows are covered and the shop becomes a small, enclosed playing space. With Squat, the audience was seated in the back of the shop on a few rows of bleachers facing *forward*. The shop windows were left uncovered. All the stage action took place between the audience and the shop windows, through which we could see the street—cars and trucks rolling along, an occasional taxi pulling up to discharge someone late for the performance we were seeing, passersby who often stopped to watch from outside and to wonder. It's the best attempt I have seen at the perennial avant-garde aim to "break" the stage into the world and vice versa.

Squat has no director; all their pieces are worked out communally. I saw four of the pieces, in all of which language was minimal (and English was used). Theater of this kind—unscripted, composed of segments imagined out of or *against* a theme, a collage of associations—is outside criticism in a certain sense. Or to be more precise, as we have seen in the painting of the last few decades, certain new kinds of art require their own specifically developed criticism. For instance, I can't possibly say whether these pieces were well- or ill-acted: the criterion is irrelevant. I can suggest their quality; and I can report that the level of invention is sufficiently fresh and fertile to keep our interest sharp.

A few highlights. The first piece is built around a reading of “The Confessions of Stavrogin,” the once-suppressed chapter of *The Possessed* that deals with the violation of a child. While the reading proceeds, a small girl is affectionately and elaborately dressed on stage, a goat wanders in and is petted, and these and other actions take on colors because of what we are hearing. Outside in the street, looking through the window from behind the actors, are various passersby who stop to chuckle, shake their heads, leave or linger. Then another passerby strolls in, bearded, wearing a long overcoat, walking a dog. Idly he joins the other onlookers. Apparently he’s just one more of them except that, when he turns, we see that the arm of his overcoat is in flames. After a few moments he walks past. A few minutes later he returns, his coat “extinguished,” and he flashes it open, revealing that he’s naked underneath.

The second piece is a gangster parody. During the stage action two men shoot at each other outside from opposite sides of the street while people walk past, puzzled or snickering. In the last piece Koos reads a letter of Antonin Artaud’s while a man shoves a small TV camera up her dress, complete with light, and we see her pubic hair on a screen as she reads about rebellion.

The Squat pieces have wit, an undercurrent of aggressive sexuality, brusque brushings-aside of expectation. None of the work is moving—emotion is not the aim. (Except laughter, especially in a pantomime piece with two glaziers that *is* well performed.) These are intelligent and imaginative constructions, designed to find out some kinds of things theatrical experience can be other than the traditional or the traditionally experimental. Many of the images and sequences stay vividly in the mind. This is hardly a definition of complete theater, but these pieces were stimulating in themselves and made me want to see more.

***K: Impressions of The Trial by Franz Kafka (New Republic, 7 January 1978)***

Theatergoing brings pleasant surprises, not—not ever—on an equal basis with disappointments and outrages, still often enough to nourish hope. The Lion Theater Company is three years old; my first encounter with them is this production called *K*, subtitled *Impressions of The Trial by Franz Kafka*, devised by the company as a whole and directed by Garland Wright, who also designed the setting and lighting with John Arnone. The work, a series of dream responses to the novel, is exquisite to see and hear. The program carries an epigraph from Kafka’s diaries in which he says that he wants to attain a view of life as a dream. This rubric makes a series of visions out of a novel that is visionary to begin with; and gives this production its main defect as well as its many virtues.

The defect is that it’s not dramatic, it’s pictorial: always elegantly *seen* and lighted and dressed, intelligently composed and canonically interwoven, but without much creation of character or embrace of anguish. A good ballet on *The Trial* might have had some of the feeling of this production without raising (which is true of ballet for me) deep expectations of character-thematic depth.

Still, the dream does get dreamed, beautifully. As far as I can remember, almost every member of the company of ten eventually plays Joseph K. A stout woman (identification impossible because actors are listed without roles) first appears as Joseph K.’s landlady, then in some male roles; dialogue gets echoed and re-echoed; and the dissolution of dream takes hold. The set, simple yet ingenious, a doorway and two windows that disappear into a black wall when closed, gives a De Chirico

spaciousness to the playing area—in the abandoned West Side Airlines Terminal. The lighting and the costumes (by David James) are all black and white so that when Joseph K. acquires a red boutonnière, it stings the eye.

I don't intend to patronize when I say that one doesn't expect work of this refinement and discipline Off-Off Broadway. I look forward to more of the Lion Theater's productions.

***Chapter Two*, by Neil Simon (*New Republic*, 7 January 1978)**

The best thing about Neil Simon's new play, *Chapter Two*, is Herbert Ross's direction. It made me think of my first Simon play, *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), where the best thing was Mike Nichols' direction. Ross worked here as if with a jeweler's loupe in his eye, engraving the tiny stuff finely, modeling careful gestures and glances and inflections with his four-actor cast to keep it all from collapsing.

It flaps around a lot anyway, but this is because of the choice of actors—if one can absolve Ross of responsibility in the casting—and the script. The hero—and can there be a remote Tanganyikan who has not read that this is Simon himself painfully readjusting after his first wife's death and eventually marrying Marsha Mason?—is played by Judd Hirsch, known as TV's Delvecchio (from the series of the same name), a moderately forceful but charmless actor. His brother is played by Cliff Gorman as if to answer the question: Whatever happened to the Dead End Kids? The two women, Anita Gillette and Ann Wedgeworth, are vocally inadequate for the huge Imperial, a theater that usually holds musicals. Wedgeworth does her usual Southern sex-pot number (remember her in the film *Scarecrow?*), and Gillette follows Ross's instructions like an obedient child. In her long worm-turns speech near the end, you can almost see her remembering the director's orders to gesture here and pause there.

The script breezes along in the first half, even through the bereavement episodes. The second half, as usual with Simon, runs out of breeze, and he puffs in a lot of wind to inflate it to full length. There's an affair between Gorman and Wedgeworth that, again in usual Simon fashion, is puritanically unconsummated. As for the main story, I have the feeling that autobiography was abandoned for show biz reversals and counter-reversals, or else the play would have been over at the intermission—as it should have been.

***Ain't Misbehavin'*, by Murray Horwitz, Richard Maltby, Jr., & Fats Waller (*New Republic*, 8 & 15 July 1978)**

"One Never Knows, Do One?" was Fats Waller's famous tag line, thrown away between verses of a song, irrelevant to what he was singing about but characteristic of his rambling ease—a big, fat, deft, froggy, songful man, amorous in the adoring-humorous old-fashioned way implied by the song-term "lovin'." I can't recall that I ever saw him in person, but I see him vividly, so it must have been in films—*King of Burlesque*, made in 1936, or *Stormy Weather*, made in 1943, the year he died (at age thirty-nine), or perhaps a short or two. Now there's a Broadway show about him. No, it's *of* him.

The last few years have seen a number of shows that re-created performers, George M. Cohan, Bessie Smith, Edith Piaf, the Beatles, and I've studiously avoided them all—not even studiously, just avoided. But I went to this because it isn't a re-creation, it's a tribute: to a man I remember warmly. The press has made *Ain't*

*Misbehavin'* (at the Longacre Theatre) sound miraculous. It's not a miracle, but it's a lot more fun than any miracle I've read about. One never knows, do one?

An all-black cast. Naturally. No book, just numbers. Five performers, three women and two men, all of them exceptionally talented and four of them with winning personalities. A pianist at a mobile upright, whose face we rarely see; a six-piece band in the background with a woman trombonist and a lovely old drummer; one setting by John Lee Beatty in the dusty, rose-and-faded gold of old vaudeville; enough lighting variations by Pat Collins to keep the eyes happy without being popped; flexible staging by Arthur Faria and Richard Maltby, Jr.; and it's a couple of hours of very, very good time.

All the songs either have music by Waller and were sung by him or were written by others, then sung and made famous by him. Among the former: the title song, "I've Got a Feeling I'm Falling," "Honeysuckle Rose," "The Joint Is Jumpin'." Among the latter: "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter" (hear the audience ignite when *that* starts) and possibly the only angry love song ever written, "Your Feet Too Big," which still makes me fall off my chair. Ken Page, the one in the cast who tries to catch Waller's style, sings both of them superbly. Imagine a song whose release begins:

*Your pedal extremities are colossal.  
To me you look just like a fossil.*

My one nit to pick is that occasionally the show strains to be spicy. But if you think that "Honeysuckle Rose" is sung here suggestively, then you haven't heard Lena Horne's recording.

Two moments in particular, both Waller's own songs, are going to last with me. The stout and beautiful Armelia McQueen, huddled against the upright, sings "Squeeze Me" in a way that makes her tinier by the second. Then, just before the loud finale, the whole quintet quietly sings "Black and Blue":

*What did I do  
To be so black and blue?*

This is the first musical in years of which I want the cast album.

### ***Nevis Mountain Dew*, by Steve Carter (*New Republic*, 21 April 1979)**

Prattle about the development of ensemble companies keeps pouring out. Meanwhile, the Negro Ensemble Company is really *doing* it. This is clear from *Nevis Mountain Dew*, by Steve Carter, which the NEC has taken from their New York home for a guest engagement at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. Carter's play is an old-fashioned piece of hoke about West Indians living in Queens, tribulations in the family of a man lying upstairs in an iron lung. It's not nearly as good as the three plays by Gus Edwards that I've seen lately at the NEC, each of which had, to some degree, a halation of myth around its seeming realism. Carter's play is like a TV-special script on a "controversial" subject, but, paradoxically just because of that, it shows how good the company is because the evening is never dull.

In fact it's hard *ever* to have a dull moment at the NEC, even when the plays are worse than Carter's, because the company is so vital and assured. Even the one

member who is more vaudevillian than actor, Frances Foster, does her vaudeville to a turn. All the others—I name only the womanly Barbara Montgomery and the reticently strong Samm-Art Williams—fill the stage with a life beyond the playwright’s grasp. The head of the company, Douglas Turner Ward, didn’t direct and isn’t acting in *Nevis Mountain Dew*, which is a double rarity, but his energy pervades. The direction is by Horacena J. Taylor, who at least had sense enough to know that her job was to let the actors reasonably loose.

The NEC may displease black activists because, in my experience of it, it deals more with the living than with the changing of black life, usually in dramatic form from the European-derived white theater. But the NEC is plainly valuable to its (predominantly) black audience: they recognize and admire members of the company the way sports fans respond to members of their team. And to a white admirer there’s a sense of life at the center cherished beyond the specific work, a sense that (though this is not literally true) any play that allows the company’s life to flourish on their stage is a good enough play to do.

And to see.

***The Haggadah*, by Elizabeth Swados (*Saturday Review*, May 1980)**

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” It’s the first question asked by the youngest son at the seder table in the home of a Jewish family on the first night of Passover. He reads it from a service called the Haggadah. And why is *The Haggadah* different from all other musical shows? Except those by Elizabeth Swados? Because, like most of her shows—*Nightclub Cantata*, *The Incredible Feeling Show*, and more—it’s a work of irresistible imagination, theatrical nativity, warm feeling, and true originality. The flight of her inspiration, never higher than it was in her collaboration with Andrei Serban on *The Trojan Women*, soars beautifully this time.

Swados calls this piece “A Passover Cantata.” The word *haggadah* comes from the Hebrew *higgidh*, “to tell,” and here she retells the story of the liberation from Egypt. (“This night” is “different” to celebrate anew that liberation.) The bondage, the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the wandering in the wilderness, the arrival in the Promised Land—all these Swados, who also directed, has dramatized with ethnically mixed singing actors, with dance, mime, narration, and puppets, all accompanied, all exalted, by her music.

She hasn’t stuck closely to the text of the Haggadah: she interweaves bits of the Old Testament, bits of Elie Wiesel and others. This is part of a threefold process. She started with the original; she let her response to it jet-propel her into cognate materials; and she assembled it all in honor of the original. The result is a rich fantasia on one of the world’s great exemplary stories, untainted by too-perfect sufferers, ending in the proclamation of a key codex of our ethos, the Ten Commandments.

The superb masks and puppetry are by a magician named Julie Taymor, who also designed the scenic pieces, wooden and sculptural, at both ends of the hall in which the show is performed. (The one sag in the piece, a gathering of old Jews around a table in Eastern Europe, is redeemed because all the old men are wonderful Taymor puppets.) Swados insists in the program that her cast of nineteen, her musicians, and others, contributed conceptually to the event. Why shouldn’t we believe her? Still it’s noteworthy that her collaborators contribute well when they

work with Swados.

She uses some traditional Jewish music and some that sounds like it, but the score is built on jazz and rock. This is her honesty. Verdi didn't try to go ecclesiastical when he wrote his *Requiem*; it sounds much of the time like great opera. Swados, who deserves this gigantic comparison at least in method, doesn't desert the contemporary idioms she loves just because she's deeply serious. For the rest of my life, when I read the lines "By the waters of Babylon, there I sat down and wept," I'll hear a rock beat behind them with strong accents on "sat" and "wept."

The central figure is the boy Moses. He moves through the whole piece right to the Promised Land—and is played by a winning nine-year-old named Craig Chang, who seems fluent in Hebrew. (There's a lot of Hebrew in the text and some Yiddish, sufficiently translated.) The musicians are led by the keyboard artist Judith Fleisher, a fixture of Swados shows.

By the time this review appears, *The Haggadah* will probably have finished its run in LuEsther Hall at the Public Theater, but work of this quality can't be ignored. Anyway, that was only its first run, I hope. Besides the fact that it ought to be recorded, it ought to be revived every spring. It does more, unpretentiously, for Passover than Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* does for Christmas.

***I Ought to Be in Pictures*, by Neil Simon (Saturday Review, May 1980)**

Neil Simon's new comedy, *I Ought to Be in Pictures* (complete with unexplained quotation marks), is about a fading Hollywood writer of films and television, visited unexpectedly by his Brooklyn daughter of nineteen whom he hasn't seen since she was three when he left her mother. That sentence really *is* what it's about. Unlike plays of merit, this one is not about anything more than its plot gimmick. I can add that the daughter, without beauty or experience, arbitrarily decided to hitchhike across the continent to ask Dad to launch her acting career; that she arbitrarily decides to return to Brooklyn and her divorced mother: but none of that matters intrinsically. Simon just plunks her into a situation—as in "situation comedy"—and whisks her off when the script is long enough. He makes some last-minute attempts to foist character changes on the two of them, but the encounter doesn't genuinely affect them in any significant way. They're just thrown together a while, for hilarity and heart tugs, and they're parted.

If an engaging actor had played the writer—say, a younger Sam Levene—it might have helped. Not Ron Leibman. He has dramatic ability, as shown in the film *Norma Rae*, but he's short on comedy and shorter still on charm. He may be aware of this; he exaggerates the man's slovenliness of manner and mind, possibly hoping to substitute casualness for appeal. On the other hand, Dinah Manoff, the daughter, starts out unattractively and, within a small orbit, develops some reality. On the third hand, Joyce Van Patten plays a third-hand part, the writer's divorcée girlfriend; but she cuts it professionally out of professional stock. Herbert Ross, a director of demonstrated deftness, doesn't seem here to have been overwhelmed with enthusiasm for his job.

*Economic Note.* For a long time now, plays in one set, like this one, have been the general rule to keep expenses down. But a play by Neil Simon with only three characters? If the gold-plated Simon wrote it that way to cut costs—and the show certainly could have used some incidental characters to fatten up the action—then it's even tougher times in the theater than we thought.

***Dialog/Curious George*, by Robert Wilson (*Saturday Review*, August 1980)**

The most famous person working in the vein known as the Theater of Images is Robert Wilson, whose company has been wildly hailed in America and Europe. The first Wilson work I saw, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), ran from 7 PM to 7 AM. It's precisely to the point to note that, in the almost three hours I saw, there was no mention of Stalin. There were lovely settings, lighting effects, sounds, tableaux—one bit disconnected from the next and the components of any one bit not necessarily unified. ("In my work," says Wilson, "each element is a text by itself.")

In the last six years, Wilson's chief collaborator has been an autistic boy named Christopher Knowles, now twenty-one; together they have produced a series of pieces called *Dialogs*. The latest, an eighty-minute piece called *Dialog/Curious George*, suggested by some children's books about a monkey called Curious George, was presented recently at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater in Lincoln Center, New York City, following performances in Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Holland. It's for two persons, Wilson and Knowles, and has one setting. The childlike décor is from drawings by Knowles, realized by Wilson. The words were selected by Knowles—more accurate than to say he wrote the text—and a lot of them (as in previous Wilson-Knowles works) are repetitions, aimless exchanges, and snips of TV/radio commercials. At one point Knowles repeats innumerable times: "Crazy Eddie must be insane."

Satire is not the point; disjunction is. The irrational and the anti-orderly have been a venerable tradition in art for some time, even before the Café Voltaire in Zurich brought forth Dada in 1916. The trouble with irrationality in art is that it's so limiting, which is why so many dadaists and surrealists change styles after a while. Wilson's additional trouble is that his collaborator's eccentricities don't, to put it delicately, always seem optional.

But my chief complaint about *Dialog/Curious George* is not aesthetic, it's economic. Wilson is seemingly suffering from the recession. He was trained as a painter and has a rich visual imagination. His productions from *Stalin* to *Einstein on the Beach* (at the Metropolitan Opera), however else they affected me, were ravishing to the eye. A group of twenty-five would dance just one number in particular costumes, gigantic sets would follow one another, lighting variations were complex. Now Wilson seems to have trouble getting grants and subsidies; this new show has only a few Poverty Row ingenuities. He didn't even commission music this time.

Without money—considerable money—Wilson is hobbled. Spending and spilling are quintessential for his spectacular vision. The famous imperative of the wonderful Polish director Jerzy Grotowski is: Toward a Poor Theater. Not Wilson. His motto, for his talent's sake, must be: Toward a Fat Subsidy. The recession is stifling the best in him.

**Harley Granville-Barker (*New York Times*, 12 March 2000)**

A prominent political figure, capable and progressive, gets involved in a sex scandal that threatens his career. Contemporary though this may sound, it is the basis of a play written in 1906: *Waste*, by Harley Granville-Barker, the playwright, actor, director, and critic. Here, as in others of his plays, Barker was deeply concerned—one might say worried—about the relationships between men and women. In this instance, he was too frankly concerned for 1906. The play was refused a license in London by



the official censor and had only one performance, a private one, with Barker as the protagonist.

He revised the play in 1926, principally to accommodate changes in locutions and social attitudes, but the revised play was not publicly performed until 1936. It is this version that Theater for a New Audience is giving its U.S. premiere this evening at the American Place Theater in New York, directed by Bartlett Sher and starring Byron Jennings and Kristin Flanders.

*Waste* is the second Barker play to be done in New York this season: an earlier work, *The Voysey Inheritance* (1905), is being presented by the Mint Theater Company. The coincidence, happy for anyone interested in intelligent and disturbing drama, emphasizes Barker's powers as a playwright. But this emphasis has its wry side. Playwriting was only one aspect of his astonishing career. There is a great deal more to him. He was, without much question, the most diversely gifted person in the history of English-language theater. Look first at the extraordinary life that, through just one of its powers, produced the still pertinent *Waste*, seven other full-length plays, some translations, and numerous short pieces.

Born in London in 1877, Barker was virtually an autodidact, which makes his lithe prose and intellectual range all the more remarkable. His father, who was in real estate, had little importance in his life. His mother was a performer; she gave public readings of poetry, which was actually a profession in the days before recordings. As a child, Barker did some touring with her, and he became an actor himself when he was fifteen.

After eight years' experience in many kinds of plays, including Shakespeare's, he acted in a special performance of *Caesar and Cleopatra*, by George Bernard Shaw (another autodidact), who was greatly impressed with him. Barker impressed others, too, with his talents and brains. In 1904, when he was twenty-seven, he was invited by a leading theater critic, William Archer, to collaborate on a book, *Scheme and Estimates for a National Theatre*. (The subject stayed with Barker. He revised the book in 1930, and all through his life much of his energy and dreaming went into aspirations for the art of theater.)

Also in 1904, Barker joined with J. E. Vedrenne, the manager of the Royal Court Theatre, to present special matinees of special plays. The enterprise flourished and expanded—so much so that for three years, under Barker's artistic direction, the Royal Court presented 988 performances of exceptional plays, including *The Voysey Inheritance* and eleven works by Shaw. Barker directed many of the productions, except the Shaw plays, which were directed by the author, and he frequently acted in Shaw. For instance, he was the first John Tanner in *Man and Superman* and the first Adolphus Cusins in *Major Barbara*. (Of his Marchbanks in *Candida*, Shaw said he was, "humanly speaking, perfect.")

In this same decade, during which he also wrote *The Voysey Inheritance*, *Waste*, and other plays, Barker began directing Shakespeare. His most notable Shakespeare work was done between 1912 and 1914, with *The Winter's Tale*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—only three productions, yet they did much to free Shakespeare of Victorian trappings, to admit a new century's sensibility. During World War I, encouraged by the British government, Barker brought a theater company to the United States where, among other performances, it did outdoor productions of Greek plays at universities (in the Yale Bowl, for example).

In America he met a woman, Helen Huntington, for whom he divorced his wife, the British actress Lillah McCarthy. His new wife despised the workaday

theater, and Barker himself was disheartened by his failed attempts to found a national repertory company. The new Mrs. Barker, who was wealthy, convinced him that he ought to part from his old friends, especially from Shaw and his wife, and devote himself solely to writing. (It was the new wife, according to theater rumor, who persuaded him to hyphenate his middle and last names. He became Harley Granville-Barker, an arrangement it is pleasant to ignore.)

After 1920 he did no acting and relatively little directing. He wrote. He wrote more plays; he translated, with his wife, some Spanish plays; and, most notably, he wrote his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. His arrangement with a publisher was to write a preface for each of the plays, and he completed twelve of them (the *Hamlet* so extensive that it is a book in itself). Of them the critic Frank Kermode has said that Barker's "aim was not to controvert other critics, but to get Shakespeare sensibly back to the stage; and his *Prefaces* embody the craft of Shakespeare's production as he learnt it by experience and study." There were other Barker books on the drama, including published lectures. Outstanding among them is *The Exemplary Theater*, in which he again argues for a national theater—for such a theater as an educational force—and argues further for the theater's relation to the university, a radical idea in its day.

Barker died in 1946 in Paris, where he had lived since 1930. (The war years had been spent in New York.) He was sixty-nine. Shaw, who was twenty-one years older and who, against his wishes, had long been parted from him, wrote a generous and affectionate obituary essay.

*Waste* presumably owed its political ambience to Shaw's influence. In 1901 Barker had joined the Fabian Society, a group of democratic socialists in which Shaw was prominent, and by the time he wrote *Waste* he had become an officer of the society. Thus he was clearly conversant with the traffickings of politics, with its concepts of honor and dishonor. His play's fortyish protagonist, Henry Trebell, is a Member of Parliament, a fiercely single-minded man so concentrated on his duties and plans that he has become, in an almost non-egotistical way, self-centered. One summer evening, during a weekend at a country house, he makes love to a married woman. The unforeseen results, professionally for him and personally for both, are terrible.

The issue is not simply that one slip can blast lives but that we never know everything that we carry within us, proud fortresses though we may think ourselves. Shaw influenced the play, yes; but above it also hovers the shade of Ibsen (about whom Barker later wrote an appreciative essay)—Ibsen, the nineteenth-century disciple of the Greeks, Ibsen, whose plays so often deal with the fate that awaits people no matter what they think or how they struggle. The life of the woman in the affair is crushed by conventions. Trebell's life is also wasted by conventions and by what Aristotle might have called a tragic flaw.

Did Barker himself have a comparable flaw, an impossibly lofty idealism about theater practice that produced another sort of waste, that kept him from using all his talents all his life? It is possible to believe it, especially after what John Gielgud said of him. In 1940 Barker came out of retirement to help direct Gielgud's production of *King Lear*. Barker was on hand for only ten days, yet Gielgud wrote of him afterward that he was "the greatest man in the theater I ever met."

**Literature**

*The Sensualists*, by Ben Hecht (*Saturday Review*, 4 April 1959)

*The Sensualists* (Messner, 256 pp.) is Ben Hecht's first novel in more than twenty-five years, and the gentlest thing to say of it is that he is somewhat out of practice. Hecht has won a large reputation as a writer of short stories and screenplays, as a newspaperman, biographer, and autobiographer. He is the co-author of three fine theater pieces, *The Front Page*, *Twentieth Century*, and *The Great Magoo*. (Jean-Louis Barrault thinks the first is one of the best American plays; this reviewer thinks the last an unappreciated vulgar delight.) He comes to his latest work full of years of experience, but, alas, they are not evident in this book, which would be callow and clumsy from any hand and is staggeringly so from his.

It would be incongruous to call his characters by name since they are virtually devoid of reality. The story deals with a Handsome Worldly Husband and a Beautiful Innocent Wife. He gets involved with a Night-Club Singer, who is desired by a Sadistic Detective. Husband is implicated in murder of Singer's estranged husband. Wife, shocked at revelation of his infidelity, nevertheless believes him guiltless of the crime and tries to help him. She meets Singer, who seduces her into a Lesbian experience. This completely deranges the Detective, who is also an impotent drug addict. More violence follows. Wife, sadder and wiser, eventually rejoins Husband.

The point of the story, presumably, is that because of the Husband's misdeeds the sheltered Wife is led to a broader and more tolerant humanity. It is a quite serviceable irony; but here, besides the incredibility of the characters, there is an ineptitude of construction and execution that would be discouraging in a beginner. Hecht's novel may be based on a true story, as he tells us, but it has not been transcribed into a truthful fiction.

Worst of all—worse even than the facile Freud with which the book is laced—are the epigrams scattered like aphoristic tinsel throughout. "Marriage is depravity with a license." "A woman's lower lip is for kissing. The upper one for crying." "A wife who doesn't betray a husband at least once makes a happy marriage impossible." "News is always bad, that's why it's news." If these few samples strike you as penetrating or witty, you may like the book.

Hecht says on the jacket that he wrote *The Sensualists* as a "sort of seminar on modern eroticism," which is curious because, despite its subject matter, it has basically a rather old-fashioned, almost prudish air. In understanding of sexual emotions the book is juvenile compared with numerous modern novels, and on physical detail it shyly turns its back. In odd contrast two brutal murders are vividly detailed.

To write thus disparagingly of an author of Hecht's achievements can only be an occasion of regret. In the period between the two world wars he and Charles MacArthur and Gene Fowler were chief members of a school of journalistic *littérateurs* noted for warm-hearted cynicism, amusing if self-conscious verbal pyrotechnics, and a respectable competence in storytelling. Theirs was the chat of the newspaperman's saloon glorified on paper, and it had a certain beery eloquence. This novel, however, is the thin rinsings of a barrel that is—at the moment, anyway—empty.

***Confusions*, by Jack Ludwig; *The War of Camp Omongo*, by Burt Blechman; & *Stick Your Neck Out*, by Mordecai Richler (*Commentary*, 1 December 1963)**

It's all very well for critics to announce that the novel is dying. They dust off their hands, then turn away to cozy exegeses of Joyce or Proust. But what about the

unlucky fellow who has been born with novelistic talent? What is he supposed to do? Become a critic? Or take up arc-welding? He knows, at least as well as the critics, what the state of the novel is: more accurately, what the state of society is—its tenuous apposition to the novel. But unless he is to play Miniver Cheevy all his life, he has to find at least partial solutions.

Certain possibilities have been posited. One proposal, already withering, was science fiction. Kosherized by Kingsley Amis and others, sci-fi was held to be a means of circumventing the present difficulties of the novel; one could simply take off into the blue and invent mirror-image societies. But I know of no serious younger writer who has switched to this channel. Another possibility, used increasingly by younger men of talent, by such writers as J. P. Donleavy, Terry Southern, Joseph Heller, and the three writers discussed here, is the one labeled, loosely, satire.

The satire guild rules are clear. One starts from certain elite premises: growth of conformity, growth of mass-produced pap for both masses and middlebrows, the faltering of idealism, the limitation of horizons by the mushroom cloud. These premises eliminate the “conventional” novel that depends on hope, freedom of action, fierce belief in the sanctity of the individual, dependable moral response. There is nothing constructive to write; there is really nothing even destructive to accomplish in any old-fashioned, cleansing manner. The only reasonable alternative is, in two senses, enjoyment of your powers—principally with archery from the sidelines. Amuse the few caves of humanity, scattered here and there in the Himalayan apartment developments, with commiserative, savage glee.

The above is meant as descriptive, not pejorative. There is truth in the premises, immediate artistic practicality in the solution. The only relevant questions are: (a) how well is it executed?; (b) granted that it serves as an outlet for writers, are there still rewards in it for readers? For, after the first dozen or so blowtorch satires, we begin to anticipate the targets, mentally reproving those writers who have skipped *J* or *K* and jumped to *L*, comparing Jones’s jab with Smith’s stab as balletomanes compare pirouettes. Camus’s familiar line about judging men today by the quality of their despair could be altered to judging them by their ridicule.

The three writers under review are—it is highly relevant—Jewish. Jack Ludwig’s hero is impaled on the point of convergence of Jewish past and fake-Christian present. Burt Blechman’s summer camp is a theater where the children of lately immigrated Jews mimic the Gentile American frontier that they missed. Mordecai Richler takes an Eskimo as a hero presumably because his urban Canadian Jews are by now too far inside to be observers or catalysts.

Ludwig’s book, *Confusions* (New York Graphic Society, 276 pp.), bubbles from a sort of Cartesian well; his hero’s revision reads: “I am confused, therefore I am.” Joseph Gillis, born Galsky, is the son of a Roxbury, Massachusetts, baker; he goes to Harvard, acquires the appropriate genus marks, and emerges as a Ph.D. in English whose conflict is heightened by his marriage to a Unitarian. (With her own problems. Unitarianism, said Erasmus Darwin in the eighteenth century, is “a feather-bed to catch falling Christians.”) Galsky-Gillis juggles his *personae* to his own wry amusement and, somewhat, to ours, as he meets and marries Nancy, reminisces about adolescent escapades, and proceeds to teach at a small California college. There he is touched to a finer issue: a move to certify a student—a millionaire donor’s son—as mentally incompetent.

High among the novel’s achievements is a party given by a California colleague that is supposed to end with musical beds and from which Joe devises a

clever but narrow escape. There are other chapters of sexual and academic comedy in which Ludwig's vigor, aimed accurately, becomes wit. But when it misses, it remains mere energy, and the book spins into lengthy barroom and campus chat of forced, frenetic marital dialogue. Also there is a tiresome twentieth-century Devil accoutred by *Esquire*. The overall structure is a patchwork of sharply inconsistent textures, and the epilogue is a shameless attempt to avert criticism of inconclusiveness and lack of theme.

Blechman's novel, *The War of Camp Omongo* (Random House, 215 pp.), although it has some funny elements, is a retrospective work of teeth-clenched hate—revenge eaten cold, as the Italians say. Randy Levine is a likeable little boy sent to a summer camp run by a windy faker with a lecherous wife, with a staff that provides a microcosm of contemporary frailties and a group of boys who are the circumcised equivalents of William Golding's lot from *Lord of the Flies*. The "war" is an end-of-season contest between Red and Blue teams, and gentle Randy, harassed into belligerence, wins a paper chase, not without having been driven into arson.

The book is composed of a large number of short sections, each with a subtitle, each laid down like a tile in a mosaic of utter loathing. Its virtues are its purity of hate and its parsimony of means—there are few superfluous words. Its chief defects are that its points are early taken, most of its lampoons quickly perceived. Despite the tidy execution in general, the director's gaseous orations become predictable; parodies of a war movie and of Elvis Presley are weak because these subjects are parodies in themselves.

*Stick Your Neck Out* (Simon & Schuster, 189 pp.), in Richler's novel, is the name of a TV quiz show that the contestant plays with his head on a guillotine block. The hero does not play it until the last chapter. The scene is Toronto, and the story concerns a wisened-up young Eskimo poet. While Toronto hucksters preserve his image as a primitive, he has imported a clutch of relatives to turn out native artifacts in a cellar at a nice profit. He is surrounded by a gallery of moral grotesques that includes a mistress who was the first female to swim Lake Ontario in less than twenty hours, a bulldozing tycoon, a vicious lady columnist, an elderly sociology student named Panofsky who poses as a doctor, and his high-pressure son who has changed his name to Peel and introduces himself: "Hi, my name is Peel. I'm Jewish."

The sick hustle of advertising, television, salesmanship, streamlined religion, the face-to-the-camera attitudes of everything from publicity itself to gymnastic lovemaking—these are some of Richler's somewhat familiar butts. The proof of his quality is that he is as amused, and amusing, as if he had just landed on earth and were sending us back a report. (An old Eskimo complains of Toronto people that they eat "*artificially* frozen foods.")

Thus these three writers have found ways to write in and for a world that, more or less, they despise. Ludwig, an intellectually superior Peel, finds roots as a writer in his rootlessness. Blechman, who presumably will never forgive the past for what it has done to him, rubs the present in it. Richler is unprejudiced; he thinks *everything* is funny. The latter two novels, one can fairly say, are devoid of hope; and Ludwig is hiply nervous about his relatively rosy ending.

One does not ask hope of them; why should they know answers just because they can write novels? Their service, these three and their fellow satirists, is to make us consider what lies beneath their gallows humor: the individual, buffeted and shrunk, in an increasingly industrialized society; his future, his fate. As cities zoom, he becomes physically smaller. What is worse, his feelings, his once spontaneous

responses, even his animosities, are mass-communicated into molds. (Juvenile delinquents imitate TV hoods; small-town politicians utter newsreel-size pronouncements; the brother of a slain New Jersey policeman, informed of the murder, voices his anguish in imitation James Cagney phrases.)

It is now reasonably clear that the mushroom cloud is by no means the only threat to the survival of humanity. In a society that seems able to breathe only in the iron lung of production and selling, inhale and exhale, men not only have to move together, as in enormous calisthenics, they have to choose and think and feel within predictable, happy, product-consuming boundaries—or the pattern is upset, the economy undermined. If enough people didn't want the plastic soap-dish or the *Reader's Digest* book selection, their individuality of taste would make a mockery of electronic computation.

Since the industrial age cannot be uninvented, any more than the Bomb can be, what are the chances for a man? For one man, however many of them there may be. Marx, who foresaw the inevitability of the machine age, hoped that socialist humanists at the controls would make all the difference. It has not happened yet, here or elsewhere; but perhaps our affluence (though less affluent than popularly thought) is only a brief, fatty delay in a huge political-social change that will at least give a man a fair chance against the machines. Or perhaps, basically unchanged, we will plunge into an air-conditioned industrial wilderness and will wander a figurative forty years before we insist on emerging in some kind of rebirth.

Meanwhile, honest and gifted writers have to face the present facts, among which is the diminished relevance of the novel to a society stunned by twentieth-century catastrophe and threat of catastrophe, increasingly unconfident of divine guidance, increasingly herded by mechanized shepherds. Some writers, very well aware of these matters, nevertheless plump for historical humanism in relatively unaltered form and—often with success—carry the “old” novel into the present. Others feel that the hostilities and irrelevancies are too patent and powerful, that seriousness is mocked, and the only recourse is to laugh. Their laughter is different from any in the chronicle of literary laughter on this continent, which has always had a strong pessimistic strain, because it does not have even the relative sanguineness of pessimism. Their chief hazard is ennui—ours, not theirs. There is a limit to the amount of laughing we can do at ourselves in wretched circumstances, the same set of wretched circumstances, no matter how real they are and even if laughter is the only available relief. If these writers forbid us to hope for significant improvement in society, then at least, for the sake of their future books, we must hope to develop some new faults.

***Blood From the Sky*, by Piotr Rawicz, and *The Fanatic*, by Meyer Levin (New York Review of Books, 20 February 1964)**

One reason for the foolishly deplored lack of great new novels is not, perhaps, the absence of great talents but that the great subjects are now too large. Tolstoy could, with one campaign, encompass the whole idea of war as he knew it, but could even Tolstoy have dealt with thermonuclear fate? If that is true of a bomb that would merely end the world and thus end all responsibilities, what shall be said of the act that withered a civilization's ethos but left it *with* responsibilities? What is a writer of fiction to do with the German mass murder of the Jews?

Leave it alone, if he can. Besides the magnitude of the matter, there is the familiar and usually true observation that fiction cannot equal the facts themselves. Further, the processes of art, no matter how holily employed, must contain (as artists know) a secret hand-rubbing glee of achievement and, always, some artifice. And shall a writer select and arrange *these* facts in order to make them more effective and take pleasure in it? Artists have of course been making art out of horror for two thousand years; but it seems profane here, not only because of the size of the atrocity as such, but because of its date in the Christian calendar A.D.

So, at least, it would seem. But all dicta of art must, happily, yield to the practice of artists. What if the writer cannot leave this subject alone, as many have not been able to do? Among such writers of fiction about the Holocaust, there is a division between the heights of John Hersey's *The Wall* and the mud of Leon Uris, with a niche well on the way down (as we shall see) for Meyer Levin. There is a further division—obvious and immediate—in fiction written about this atrocity between reconstructions by those who were not personally involved and distillations by those who, one way or another, were involved.

Of the latter group, there have been two more examples in recent months: *Herod's Children*, by Ilse Aichinger, and *The Terezin Requiem*, by Josef Bor. The first, although often poignant and always delicate, diminishes in effect as it proceeds because it has only one effect: a child's attempt to understand and deal with homicidal madness, a nursery picture of persecution. The second novel never makes an effect because it takes an anomalous and moving fact—the performance of Verdi's *Requiem* in a concentration camp—and treats it with no fictional art whatsoever.

To date, the outstanding work in this latter group has been André Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just*. It is now joined and, in my view, surpassed by Piotr Rawicz's *Blood From the Sky* (Harcourt, Brace, and World, 316 pp.). Schwarz-Bart used a lovely Jewish legend as armature for a story that wound through history to the 1940s and that sang essentially of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God. Rawicz's novel, in addition to its mute, stony grief, its oblique but overwhelming rendering of the terror, is also in fact (if incredibly) humorous; is also lustful, lyric, clever, exciting. Indeed it has many of the textures of (shall we say) a fine secular novel. In short, Rawicz has not been prevented by his feelings from transmuting the source of those feelings into ruthlessly truthful art.

The novel deals with a certain Boris, a Ukrainian Jew who looks more the former than the latter, a *flâneur*, a poet, an amorist, a contriver who undergoes the terrors of the German occupation of his country as if they were a test of his ingenuity. We know from the start that he survived because his story is told mostly by him, with manuscript additions, to an unidentified listener in a postwar Paris café. In fact, the general tone of the book is of a café conversation, genial, reminiscent, commenting, discursive. ("I have opened this story as one would open a shop.") The conversational ease of the narration allows the iron to enter tangentially; the indignities, tortures, and executions are often observed somewhat dryly, almost as if they had to be expected by those not smart enough to evade them. The Germans, and their stooges and informers, are handled as if they were just honest fellows doing their jobs, which included such acts as hanging a dozen Jews from a balcony. ("They swung as the wind willed, like twelve black overcoats on invisible hangers.") The gouging out of Jewish children's eyes is given no special emphasis—it is related simply as a step in the narrative. This is the same voice that Babel uses for the mutilation in *The Road There*. (The reminders of Babel throughout are frequent.)



Boris looks so little like a Jew that he can for long times escape German harassment, so he is indeed an observer, able to reflect, to divert his tears into wryness, to admit bitter paradox. (Of a girl forced to work in a Jewish hospital and who comes to love nursing: "All in all, the few brief months before the liquidation were the least distressing in her life.") He can admit the terrible hot truth to himself when he sees a line of young girls being led away to execution. ("I was overcome by a feeling of jealousy at the thought of their end, of the flame that was to usurp my place and lick these breasts and hips to death. A jealousy fiercer than that which I felt for their lives . . .")

His penis figures in the book symbolically and literally. His affair with the voluptuous, jealous Naomi is in a sense his life-line through his travails, travels, escapades, and final escape; his circumcision is a constant threat and, at last, very nearly gets him killed. Further, one of the most offhandedly cruel passages is about electrical torture of the privates. Rawicz describes how the steel ring is slipped on, describes the room ("well furnished and newly painted, preferably pale gray. The portrait of some leader, on the wall, is extremely apposite—I would even say indispensable. His mustache absolves all sins, even before they are committed.") Then the officer at the desk moves his hand toward the button:

You clothe yourself, in anticipation, in your thickest armor. You bid agony come and set it at nought. He can pluck the living heart from me, and I won't cry out, I won't confess to anything. I'll pull through. You have summoned all your resources: huge they are, haughty as a mountain. All the same, you take a peek at the switch. And then: click! The figure at the desk has pressed his button. The shock! Where is the shock . . .?! It hasn't come. You have expended yourself in anticipation, your resistance has been whirring away to no avail. You were as strong as a lion, as steadfast as a martyr of the Church, and all for nothing. And then just as you are saying to yourself: "What a pity. I'd have been splendid!" the shock arrives, savage and excruciating, too much for your resolutions, too much for you. "You" no longer exist. Then, but only then, you start to scream and after that . . . it's cards on the table.

There are several quite extraneous tales in the book, most of the hero's poems do not arrest, and one wonders why during a long term in prison he has no thought of Naomi, with whom he has undergone so much. Yet these flaws almost seem organic to a work whose mode is impressionistic, informal, self-protectively egotistical.

Rawicz was born in the Ukraine in 1919, spent three years in concentration camps, and has since lived and studied in Poland and France. He writes in French (and the English provided by Peter Wiles is often neatly turned). What he has tried to do with his experience and with his knowledge of the larger experience is to *pretend* in a deliberate, grim way—to smile at it, to let Boris recount his life something like a twentieth-century Gil Blas, not really demanding that anyone believe what he says yet treating it as commonplace. This game with reality serves to give his subject another dimension of horror because we supply for Rawicz the missing steps of his progress to this view: viz., everyone knows what happened and no one can really comprehend it, not even those who were there; so why not treat it as if it were only one more of the many tribulations of man? This shrugging, sometimes even light acceptance of hell makes the depth of the abyss even clearer; it gently but pitilessly illuminates the many hidden deaths—of Jews, of others, of worlds—that are contained in it. Sitting at his

café table, Boris tells us as easily as he might have commented on a passing girl that two thousand years of history may have ended up in six million graves.

Rawicz has kept the promise that his hero makes. At one point Boris sees a group of Jews with hammers being forced to break up tombstones in an old Jewish cemetery. ("An *aleph* would go flying off to the left, while a *he* carved on another piece of stone dropped to the right.") Himself temporarily safe from the Germans, he thinks:

I must escape . . . I must rescue the old cemetery . . . Shall I ever be able to take it upon my shoulders like a black cloak? Muffled up in the old cemetery, as though in the sky, I must start on my journey toward distant lands, and may we not be recognized! May nobody recognize us!

He has carried out the old cemetery, past those who might have recognized it and stopped him. But the price he has paid is disconnection. His quietness is not philosophical calm; it is numbness. He sits cold now among the living, disbelieving in their life.

In Rawicz's novel there is a dialogue between an old rabbi and God on the perennial question of the existence of evil. There is an exchange on the same subject in Meyer Levin's new novel, *The Fanatic* (Simon & Schuster, 478 pp.), and the difference is that between art and perspiration. The differences persist. One book is the work of an artist who has seen, knows what he does not understand, and can create the necessary silences; the other is the work of an ambitious mechanic who thinks he can bruise and shove his way through tons and tons of paper (*not* of experience) to Apocalypse—to an apocalyptic vision.

Some years ago Levin was the plaintiff in a lawsuit concerning a dramatization that he had made of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. His novel deals with a young American rabbi-writer who brings a lawsuit about a dramatization he has made of a posthumous book by a (male) Jewish concentration-camp victim. There is the usual disclaimer of resemblances in a preface: no, it is unusual, for it goes on longer than most, and with Levinesque weight implores us to confine our thoughts to his characters.

Confine them, then, and you find yourself listening to the dead hero-author, narrating the story in the first person from beyond the grave, as he watches the dramatist (now married to his ex-sweetheart) deal and bicker with theatrical agents and producers and lawyers, testifying in court, all of which Levin believes would be of interest to the dead man. The ghost even keeps an eye on a radio program in a Broadway restaurant. As Hamlet put it, "*Hic et ubique?* Then we'll shift our ground"—to spare ourselves criticism of this clumsily earnest but eventually spurious novel. For Levin is the kind of author whose sententiousness and poor writing derogate his doubtless sincere work to the level of the big books on "important" subjects cynically contrived by fiction-mongers.

***A Fine Madness* (New Republic, 29 February 1964) and *The Penny Wars* (New Republic, 24 August 1968), by Elliott Baker**

"The fabulous invalid," a term once applied to the theater, now seems more apt for the American novel, generally despaired of and underrated, especially by those whose criterion of health is "greatness." One of the novel's recent refusals to die has

taken the form loosely of satire—works by Southern, Heller, Donleavy, Blechman, Friedman, and Richler (technically Canadian but surely an American *writer*). What these works share is a sense of comedy, not as remedy but as iron lung, the one area (they imply) where today's writer can breathe. Whether or not his work has any meliorative effect seems secondary.

All these men have written novels of some merit—most of them deserve better than faint praise—but all of them suffer from one another's existence. To read the latest one usually means to compare how well B skins advertising, let us say, with the way the way A skinned it. By now there hardly seems room for another such novel.

Until, of course, one comes along that sweeps away objections, as does Elliott Baker's novel *A Fine Madness* (Putnam, 319 pp.). Baker has had the audacity once more to assay the bitter-sweet satirical fruit; and many of his targets are familiar: psychoanalysis, salesmanship, conformity, philistine respectability, phony emancipation. But three elements distinguish his novel: its construction, its youthfully passionate fury combined with mature insight, and the fact that it has a hero. Not merely a central character, a passive resister, an observer, a victim, or even an anti-hero. A hero who struggles credibly against odds that we recognize and who wins a credible victory. What is even more audacious of Baker is that he made him a poet.

Samson Shillitoe cares about nothing but poetry. That is his strength and his limitation; but his limitation only reinforces his strength by concentrating it. (Even his admiration for his stoic father, gnarled and quietly dying, is diminished when he learns that the old man didn't understand his book.) Samson lives and has a job in New York, is married to his second wife, a loyal and complaining waitress with a bad leg. He drinks, wenches when possible, is irresponsibly, slovenly, and rude. He left Indiana as a youth, moving from job to job, searching. ("He picked up his pay in Denver and wandered off again, feeling between the hips of the continent.") He discovered poetry and himself; and developed in the army during the war, under the guidance of an intellectual friend who was eventually killed. But the friend had left Samson a poet:

That had been the armistice for Shillitoe. While all the others dodged and crawled toward victory he stood upright, marking the design of the puffs and pockmarks and the crazy-legged upside-down cows and sullen-roofed villages. He was a poet and was impenetrable. The fools had mistaken this for bravery and given him a battlefield commission.

After the war he published his one book, married, begot:

He'd practically forgotten her existence until she floated in with that hatchery halo and cooed her announcement.

"I'm going to name him after President Roosevelt," she added.

"Beverly, Beverly," he reasoned, "we've got to stop passing the buck to babies."

Now divorced from Beverly, he spends much time evading her lawyer and the demands for maintenance payments.

The book's action takes Samson through the crisis of his struggle for life: fighting with his fingernails every inch of the way, thieving, wriggling, cheating to make elbow-room for himself in the world to do what he cares about—write poetry.

He is always conscious of this, without embarrassment, never pretentious about it. (Well, hardly ever. One or two of his explications might have been better omitted.) At the end he has triumphed. He is on his way back to the Indiana home left to him by his father, accompanied by his dumb but somehow comforting wife (now pregnant), having paid for his freedom with a piece of his brain. Literally: he was railroaded into a lobotomy. Figuratively: you may wrench free of the world but not without a mark. Now he is safe, protected by his father's best legacy: a motel register containing evidence of the local sheriff's escapades, with which Samson can keep that sheriff from reporting his whereabouts to his first wife's lawyer. This blackmail, a use of society's conventions to free him from society, is again more than literal.

Frenetically serious, *A Fine Madness* is also funny with ultra-high frequency. Samson, drunk, addressing a ladies' literary society: "Looking at your faces, I know you are all sincerely interested in poetry. Or else my fly is open." Samson's quondam employer, Moscovitz—whose one standard is whether an event is good or bad for Jews—on the subject of Jewish gangsters:

So much damage one bad apple can do. Remember Murder, Incorporated, with all the Bugsies and No-Noses? *Mentsch!* Everything Gershwin accomplished, they spoiled.

When Samson is welcomed home to Indiana with a gruesome joke, he thinks: "Good old Hoosier humor, macabre to the sentimental slobs who couldn't understand leverage." Those without leverage, Hoosier or not, will be offended by much of this book as some are by Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove*.

The other characters in *A Fine Madness* are recognizable without being deeply developed. Although the novel is written from more than one viewpoint, these others are not more real to us than they are to Samson. They perform a grimly comic ballet in the book as they do in his life. Starting a new chapter with a new character is sometimes puzzling until one sees how purposefully this practice weaves into Samson's story, how the balances and tensions are maintained, how every seed produces. This is the best-constructed novel I have read since Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, one in which the form itself is gratifying.

Occasionally there are gas bubbles in the prose, as on the opening and closing pages. But this is a work of such utter conviction and gravity that it appears to laugh at anything less grave than its central belief; a novel of greater dimensions than most of the recent crop of "satires" because—without Technicolor—*A Fine Madness* states as well as stabs. Shillitoe's life-view: "Length and stress, that's all it takes. Only two issues. How long can you survive? Where will you throw your weight? That's all."

It is a cozy critical commonplace that life is more important than art, possibly because that is true for critics. It is possibly also true for artists. For the best ones, it is not true. It is not true for Samson, who, though the Bomb may drop or God may die, cannot have lived to no purpose. The book's hard, gravelly hope lies in his contempt—the contempt of this dirty, scrabbling, selfish man for all the niceties that would make him sweetly social, that would sap his strength, his ruthlessness with everyone including himself. His curse and his consolation are that, like most heroes, he was born at the wrong time.

We all know by now that, for many modern artists and critics, the humanist tradition is finished. In literature, for instance, they maintain that plot, character, and

verisimilitude are dead. Their arguments, in all the arts, are often eloquent, their passion strong, their reasons for discontent are clear. And I am not building to an antithesis: I think the adjective “new” has now become inseparable from the word “art.” Not in the sense of novelty or gimmick but in the awareness that a career in art is no longer analogous with, say, a career in law. You cannot get your figurative license, then simply hang out your shingle and expect that continual practice in approved modes will take care of the rest of your life. Art not only has to be made these days, it has to be justified, every time out.

My chief difference with many avant-garde critics (and it’s not an antithesis) is that they propose their views as a complete replacement for all past views, instead of as additional avenues of possibility. The sterilities of practice in traditional modes do not, for me, add up to a cancellation of those modes. I do see traditions as coming under the same stringencies of contemporary relevance as any *nouveau roman* or minimalist painting. And what are we to do with a novel that satisfies those stringencies if it happens to have a plot and recognizable characters? Burn it on revolutionary principle?

Here is a new novel by Elliott Baker called *The Penny Wars* (Putnam, 255 pp.), which is written in a straight realistic mode yet which seems to me a modern work. It is hard to conceive of an enthusiast for the new who would find this book unrewarding, if he just grants it a little patience. Patience, not because it begins badly but because its style is traditional and its subject is conventional (a year in the life of an American adolescent). I have centered on avant-gardists, although I think the book’s appeal is much wider, precisely because I think Baker has brought sternly to bear on this conventional material the experience of the last thirty years in ironic precept, moral flux, and anti-cholesterol prose. Those elements are not as immediately visible as the book’s surface conventionalities; but before long the novel is revealed as a good example of the humanist tradition employed by an author who keeps on asking, “What use is that tradition now?”

Baker’s first novel, *A Fine Madness*, published four years ago, applied much of the same stringency to the concept of heroism: is heroism possible or desirable now? With savage wit and ugly farce, he created a credible hero, a poet. (The novel was made into a wretched film directed by someone or other. I wish it had been directed by Stanley Kubrick.) That book took place in the present day. In *The Penny Wars* he goes back to 1939, the seventeenth year in the life of a boy named Tyler Bishop who lives in a city in upper New York State. (The author is coeval with his hero and was born in Buffalo.) From the first page, the atmosphere of the novel, in which Tyler breathes, is his emotional involvement in the brewing European war.

The events of the story, though set in that frightening ambience, are seemingly the trivia of any adolescence. But Baker has made every sequence a bland-looking pellet that explodes and reverberates. For instance, in the opening chapters Tyler, his younger brother, and his mother are harassing their father into auditioning, as a singer, for “Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour.” The father has a good voice but he alibis; the family persists. All through this episode the re-creation of thirties atmosphere is perfect, the domestic squabbles are pungent and fast—in fact, everything is so well done that the reader finds himself irritated with an author who can do all this so well and who settles merely for doing it. Then, on the morning of the tryout, the father takes to his bed, complaining of a pain. The mother is so furious that she literally pounds him, but he won’t get up. Tyler refuses to let the chance slip;

he cons his brother into going to the radio audition with him and trying out under his father's name. When they get back home, having failed, they find that their father is dead: of a heart attack. And suddenly the whole episode tilts. We see the underside of the surface: the propensity to force new experience into old patterns; the real horror of the "Amateur Hour" as a symbol of escape; the demonic jest, all the more demonic because those who are stabbed by it can now see the joke.

Later, there is a section in which Tyler furiously tries to lose his virginity in a grapple with an unattractive girl. The incisive accuracy of the ludicrous dialogue and details, the indignity of his desperation are etched with merciless wit. It is very well done, but again, almost too well done for what it is about. Then, when Tyler gets home that evening, he makes a discovery that converts his funny sofa-struggle into a tiny fragment of (disquietingly) universal sexuality.

Tyler is a better than credible character, he is enveloping of the reader, at least retrospectively; but the most trenchant character in the book is the one who epitomizes the decade politically. (To repeat, Europe is never far from Tyler's thoughts.) He is a German-Jewish refugee, a dentist from Düsseldorf, Jewish enough to be forced to flee, German enough to resent being excluded. The dentist brings Europe to Tyler's city, to his very house. The boy is puzzled by the refugee who refuses to join in his anti-fascist sloganeering, who himself makes anti-Semitic remarks, and who refuses to condemn Germany wholesale as a nation of beasts.

One night the dentist takes Tyler's widowed mother to the movies, to a film that caricatures German soldiers as stupid clowns. The refugee starts to shout protests, and the audience starts to jeer him:

She didn't know what had upset him, something in the film obviously.  
But she had to get him out of there.

"They are ridiculing a whole people when they do this . . . What about Leibniz?" he shouted. "What about Goethe?"

"Please," she begged.

The dentist, unflinchingly drawn in his arrogance, his insistent erudition, his intolerable logic, has an ambivalent influence on Tyler. The boy dislikes him as a personality and as a disturber of simplicities, but we see that his encounter with the dentist is providing him with some useful scars of paradox.

The novel brings this contradictory relation to a head in a closing scene that shows superlatively Baker's ability to slice with small instruments into huge subjects. The matter of black-white relations has run through the book in a lolling, peripheral, pre-war way. But at the end Tyler finds himself, against his will, in a brutal fight with three blacks, compelled by a loyalty to the dentist whose final tragedy he already knows: "He was aware of snarling back at them, but he didn't want to. He wanted to tell them he was on their side. Only his mouth was too thick with blood. . . ." Typically of the book's method, Tyler's relation with blacks has begun in a veristic, humorous, small-scale manner; then it slides—and darkens as it slides—into the terrible.

*A Fine Madness* was, among other things, an exceptionally well-structured novel; *The Penny Wars* is somewhat less so. There is some essential material that Baker didn't know how to get in without leaving Tyler's viewpoint, which otherwise prevails, and these side-currents rock the Tyler-ness of the book. There is also a difference in the prose of the books, but an agreeable one. *A Fine Madness* was full of

glistening phrases; there are fewer in this second novel, it is much less quotable. But I take this as a sign of self-confidence. The prose is like the book itself: uncomplicated but not simple, wry, resonant.

Baker disbelieves in Blake's Innocence and Experience. Tyler is no Salinger hero being corrupted out of original pure knowledge into the world's wiliness. He is a youth coming face to face with the prices of truth, realizing that he will have to decide whether to pay them, if he can.

As for Baker the novelist, he has made his decisions. Only a man who has been affected by the last thirty years in the life of society and of art could have written this novel in exactly this way, but he has done it without completely jettisoning the past. I don't want to inflate the stature of his book; it would be unfair to him and his readers. (Many, I hope.) *The Penny Wars* is a modest novel, but it is an authentic demonstration that what is viable in tradition, humanist or otherwise, does not have to be swept away.

***Chaos and Night*, by Henry de Montherlant; *The Interrogation*, by J. M. G. LeClézio; & *The Woman in the Dunes*, by Kobo Abé (*New York Review of Books*, 14 January 1965)**

"For years I have been keeping the Spanish Civil War at bay," Henry de Montherlant wrote in his notebooks in 1938, "as I know how to keep things at bay. The reason is that I would become too involved . . . It is more important that I should finish *Les Garçons*." Twenty-three years later the subject overcomes him. Having in the interim launched and (he says) finished a preeminent career as a dramatist, he turns in his new novel to the Spanish Civil War, not only with perspective on the past but with the present posed against the past. Well rendered in English by Terence Kilmartin, *Chaos and Night* (Macmillan, 240 pp.) is concerned with a relic of the war, a Spanish anarchist, now sixty-seven, who has been exiled in Paris for twenty years. The old anecdote tells us that, when a Frenchman was asked by his grandchild what he had done during the Revolution, he replied, "I survived." In effect, Montherlant examines this answer for his hero: to find out what survived and why and whether it was worth the effort.

Celestino Marcilla has an independent income, a twenty-year-old daughter, a passion for bullfighting (starved for a generation), a few fellow-exile friends. He writes cranky sweeping articles, some of which he sends to newspapers, a few of which are published, and many of which are typed by his daughter for his "archives." He considers the approach of death. As part of his preparation, he not only plans his deathbed scene, with the proper furniture, he also breaks with his few friends, as if subconsciously scrubbing himself free of the world in a ritual bath before the long journey. ("He was undergoing the last change of life, similar to the crisis of puberty in adolescents, or the flowering of the virgin into the young woman.") As for his politics and philosophy, the fixed attitudes of twenty-five years ago have been abraded by the passage of time and the petrification of desperate obstinacy. His mind has become a cave of small winds, rustling the dry leaves of dogged anarchism and atheism, hatred of Franco, hatred of the Church and—especially—of the United States.

At this point, he is jolted by news from Madrid that his sister has died and that he must return to settle her estate. His daughter wants to accompany him, and against his premonitions, he permits it. The journey back is mixed with fear, excitement, loathing. Every moment in Madrid he expects arrest, although he has a visa. His

daughter is just as charmed as he dreaded by the country, its manners, its religion, its political climate, everything he detests. He prepares to return to Paris as soon as possible. The day before his planned departure he goes to a bullfight; then in his hotel room he dies alone. Soon after, the police arrive with a warrant for his arrest as a political nuisance. On the back of his neck they find four wounds, like those a matador might inflict on a bull.

Two themes run through this austere but rich novel, one explicit, one manifested through the book's shape and sum: the realities of political belief, and God's last laugh. As for the former, it becomes increasingly clear to Celestino that seemingly immutable principles are a matter of the moment in which they are acquired; they depend on environmental conditions, one's desires, one's very metabolism. As to Celestino's atheism, the Catholic Montherlant seems to be saying that God encourages it as the matador likes spirit in the bull. It is irrelevant whether the bull "believes" in the matador; the man's *dominio* exists. (The book is pranked with bullfighting terms, all annotated). Unknown to Celestino and clear to us only at the end, God the matador plays with Celestino throughout, passing with his cape so that Celestino will charge with the illusion of power and control. Then, after seeing a *corrida* that leaves him with intimations of imminent death, Celestino trudges back to his hotel room where God closes in for the kill and leaves him with the stigmata on his neck. He is buried in this theist country—on his tombstone the inscription *Laus Deo*.

The book is not a heavy religious parable; it is a political novel by a religious man. One need not share Montherlant's faith, nor any faith, to see the scope of the cosmos defined by Celestino's reticent vainglory. The book has a certain bloodlessness, a clinical coolness about the fierce struggles of this century as it has moved towards or away from communism; but the Olympian view is not used to sneer, only to perceive. We have had fervor, we have had disillusion; there is room for what amounts to post-mortem. The term is apposite because the autopsy may tell us something useful for the future.

When Celestino sees the ongoing life in Madrid, he is naïve enough to be dejected. In Paris he justified his unhappiness by telling himself that he was unhappy because his country was unhappy: that made it a noble unhappiness. But if his country was happy, his unhappiness in Paris was no more than the unhappiness of a failure. (The final irony is that the arrest for political reasons, which he feared but which would have given his exile a *raison d'être*, does not arrive until after his death.)

Montherlant seems not to be saying that political belief is futile but that it must remain as alive as life; that unexamined rigidity means egotism, not integrity; that killing in war has ultimately to be taken lightly because ultimately it cannot be taken seriously. The deaths that Celestino has caused and seen have been mocked by time, as, to some degree, time mocks all such deaths. (See today's paper.) Nor does Montherlant cheaply belittle his hero *vis-à-vis* God. In a moment of frustration Celestino reverts to "bullfighting" the cars in a Paris street and is almost killed. In the whole of this little scene, which has not lasted more than twenty minutes, he had touched the three limits of his genius: the Comic, for he had been ridiculous, the Tragic, for he had risked his life, and the Profound, because of the reasons that had led him to risk it.

This, with other elements, makes us believe that essentially what Montherlant has attempted here is an examination, for the religious, of the conflict between predestination and free will. But the cosmic view is not reserved to the religious



alone. Others as well can see the choices and inevitabilities, the silliness and nobility, in the old anarchist.

Every country seems to develop its own kind of young writer. In America at present the dominant tone in young writers is surrealist irreverence, sometimes satirical, sometimes even funny. In France the dominant tone at present seems to be microcosmic subjectivity, not the conventional inward journey but subjective reality converted into a surrogate superior world. *The Interrogation* (Atheneum, 243 pp.), by J. M. G. Le Clézio, has been an immense success in France. As soon as it lost a tight race for the Prix Goncourt, it was awarded the Prix Renaudot, and the story of the twenty-three-year-old author's close run was prominent in the Paris press. A happy aspect of this is that a literary event, even the politics of a literary event, is still important in France.

*The Interrogation*, deftly translated by Daphne Woodward, deals with a young man named Adam Pollo, who lives alone in a house near the sea in southern France, walks, does not walk, talks to people, visits and is visited by a girl, but is in essence as solitary as the Crusoe who supplies the epigraph for his story. The novel traces his mental decline after his release "out of a mental home or out of the army"—much of it in interior monologues. But his retrogression is presented as contemporary heroic myth, not pathology, in a manner that implies the superiority of his withdrawals and distortions to the facts of life around him, that these withdrawals are indeed caused by the drabness and terror of the facts.

This of course is neither a new field for fiction nor a fresh view of contemporary society. The highhandedness of the young about the stupidities of the world they inherit is an ancient strophe, and the private purities of schizophrenia and paranoia are a latter-day mode of expressing it. Le Clézio burdens himself with superficial trickeries—lines crossed out in the printed text, newspaper pages—but he has some gift of vision and an imagination that flies at the touch of a certain light, a view, a voice. If over-reaction were not the very tonality of his book, one could indict him for over-reacting. As it is, his novel—easily readable and sometimes poignant—fails simply by being insufficiently relevant to large concerns, a youthful paw at the universe instead of the intended tragic embrace. The tragedy soon wears away into self-consciousness and we are left with a series of attitudes substantiated, partly, by a vivid talent.

*The Woman in the Dunes* (Knopf, 241 pp.), by the Japanese novelist Kobo Abe, is his first book translated into English—the dull English of E. Dale Saunders:

[The entomologist's] efforts are crowned with success if his name is perpetuated in the memory of his fellow men by being associated with an insect. The smaller, unobtrusive insects, with their innumerable strains, offer many opportunities for new discoveries.

An office worker whose hobby is insect-collecting goes to a lonely section of the coast on his vacation. He comes across a fishing village, each of whose houses is set in a deep pit in the dunes to protect it from the weather. He stays overnight in a house with a woman. In the morning no ladder is lowered for him. He is kept prisoner: to help shovel sand into buckets, to keep the house from being buried, and, incited by proximity, to beget children with the woman. Thus he is impressed into the survival and continuity of the village.

The plot, which is what it must be called, is designed as a framework for symbolisms of freedom, love, tenacity, stupidity, hope. There is no inherent demerit in such a plot but there is inherent risk. As soon as the shape becomes clear, the reader becomes aware of a blueprint being slowly followed. Unless the author is able to keep us concentrated on the present moment with interest of character and richness of texture, we become impatient. This is too often true of Abé's book.

The novel has been converted into a film, with Abé's screenplay, by the young Japanese director Hiroshi Teshigahara, a film in every way superior to the original. Teshigahara's visual and structural senses—implemented by a good cast and superb cinematography—supply the characterizations, tensions, bitter implications that are possible but generally unrealized in the novel.

***Roar Lion Roar and Other Stories*, by Irvin Faust (*New Republic*, 30 January 1965)**

"I am a youth!" Armand whispered to himself, looking at his neighbors. "I am a special kind of youth. With a magical substance!"

His name is not Armand and his "neighbors" are other members of a movie audience, but his words are the quintessence of his story, of most of the stories in Irvin Faust's first book, *"Roar Lion Roar" and Other Stories* (Random House, 213 pp.). They deal with youths who think they are special, even when the particularity consists of a special happiness at fitting neatly into the jigsaw of society better than others. Each one has found a somewhat different magical substance: in Armand's story ("Into the Green Night"), which is the simplest, it is the romantic cloak of movie-balcony dreams; but each substance is a fixative of myth and accessible heaven.

Faust's primary gift is for "seeing" a story. With some writers this means merely scouting for easy ironies and devising gimmicks. With Faust it is the ability to perceive the reality of pertinent intangibles; and to dramatize them with a delicacy that heightens but does not obtrusively contrive. In several instances he comes to a kaleidoscopic fantasy finale because the story does not really conclude: he intensifies its chief components into a fast whirl, then stops. Once, near the end of his first story, he uses a coincidence that we must accept if we want the story to function—and, by that time, we do want it to function. This is a tribute on which he has, justifiably, relied. From the first page he makes us want to read him because it is immediately clear that he knows exactly why he wants to write this story and probably has the power to succeed.

The title of that opening story is "Philco Baby." The first sentence:

"Good just barely afternoon, Everybody," purred the voice in his shirt pocket, and on signal Morty smiled secretly, brushed his hand inside, and, without losing a beat of the packing and stacking, fondled the warm little head and whispered back, "Good just barely afternoon. Every."

This is an opening line that announces ability (which, admit it or not, every author wants to do, new or not) and in which that ability swiftly accomplishes several artistic ends. Consider what that one line does: It shows a satirically selective ear for current jargon. It tells us something of the hero's occupation, probable age, and background.

It creates an emotional relationship between him and his pocket radio. It thus sketches his social attitudes, beliefs, needs.

The line is like a potent seed out of which the story flowers. The pocket radio goes everywhere with the shipping clerk, is the last thing he hears in his furnished room after he turns out the lights, the first thing he hears in the morning. It is not a safeguard against loneliness; there is evidence that he need not be alone. He *chooses* to live alone in the ambience of that radio, he wants it to be his Baby, his love; he wants it to dictate his gestures, his idioms, how he feels about his brand of beer and his filter cigarette. The little radio is his pocket priest, and he responds to the litany all day long in generally silent communion. That is the point of the story: not the horrors but the joys of conformity, the fullness that ad-mass jargon and jingle supplies to otherwise frantically self-dependent lives. When he runs into Miss Mandell at Coney Island (the coincidence I noted above), she has to wrest the thing from his pocket and literally smash it before he is able to pay attention to her; and as she envelops him under the boardwalk (saying “*I’m going to help you now*”), Morty tingles but is not yet convinced that he has moved onward to something better. She is not yet as glamorous as the disc jockeys and Connies and Peggys with whom he has been spending his days and nights.

The same hunger for communion with something more golden than one’s own life, the same ecstasy in embracing large publicity images, is the core of the title story, “Roar Lion Roar,” the most poignant in the book. Ishmael Ramos is a young Puerto Rican in New York, figuratively homeless, who is ostracized in junior high, thrown out, and is uninterested in the various jobs that the social worker gets him. At last she finds him a job in the boiler room of Columbia University. The mystique of the university image seizes and elevates Ishmael as Radioland enfolded Morty. Ishmael buys and wears a Columbia blazer as an acolyte dons vestments, prays to a saint named Alma whose statue is on the campus, agonizes through football games as if they were dark nights of the soul. His creed is not the radio commercial but the old college try. At a football game, rapt and anxious in the stands:

He remembered the rules on the blackboard in the gym. “O.K., gong,” he yelled, “Les achiv mental guts.”

This is funny but it is no laughing matter because, when the team fails in the big game, Ishmael’s mind and will fail. It is his tribute of love, his gratitude for a chance to belong, that he lets his sanity go down with his team.

Other stories conjugate other sets of images: “The Duke Imlach Story” (a title seemingly conceived by its protagonist) in crooner-columnist-Broadway terms; “The World’s Fastest Human” in a black athlete’s sports-sex-escape terms; “Googs in Lambarene” in pop social-conscience terms. Essentially they are all religious stories: of the need for rite and ritual language and, even more, of the need in the obscure youth for secret converse with the Great Powerful Beautiful—a bond that he knows about, though no one else does, that gives pride to his humiliation, consolation to his obscurity, parenthood to his orphaned state amidst onrushing coldness. Here is Ishmael as his team loses the big one and his mind disintegrates:

Do you know? Do anybody? Whatsa stinkin difference. The Lions they know and that’s what counts. . . . “Les go Li-yons, we number one in the Ivory Leak,” he whispers in the last cool breath he ever has.

The four other stories of the ten in the book deal with different subjects. “Jake Bluffstein and Adolph Hitler” (which curiously misspells Adolf throughout) is an attempt to uncover the latent hate in a Jew for Jews and for being Jewish, to anatomize the compulsions of the death wish. Its strength lies more in the horrid fascination and possible truth of its idea than in the conviction with which Faust depicts Bluffstein’s metamorphosis. “Justice for Ladejinsky” is set in a predominantly Jewish adult summer camp, familiar Arthur Kober territory; but it takes place in the summer of the Army-McCarthy hearings, 1954, and it explores, with some success, the facility of liberal sloganeering as well the iron grimness of the time—particularly for theater people. These currents touch and affect a young actor’s consciousness, career, sex life.

“Miss Dorothy Thompson’s American Eaglet” is about a Brooklyn high-school boy during World War II who does his bit by responding to Miss Thompson’s appeal for summer farm volunteers. The story of Myron Leberfeld in Vermont, living and working with the Leicester family, is hilariously accurate and sure, as the boy introduces some quite elemental planning into their farming operations and wins their awed respect both because of his seeming genius and the good luck he brings—augmented by his exotic quality as a Jew. For Myron it is the summer in which he first tastes manhood, in the senses of gaining respect, exercising control, and exacting at least wide-eyed devotion from the farmer’s ripe daughter. At the end of the summer, as his train leaves, the Brooklyn boy looks down on the weatherbeaten, ostensibly bereft Yankee family:

My final inspiration in a summer filled with inspiration. Leaning far down, almost over their heads, I traced in the air, boldly but delicately, like Stokowski, two interlocking triangles, the *Mogen David*, the Star of David. . . . Their faces, their bodies suddenly relaxed, as if a great weight were dropping away, and they all smiled, even the twisted old man, and they began to wave. It was what they had been waiting for, of course; even though the Jewish feller was gone, no matter what, they would be *all right* for a while.

“The Madras Rumble,” formally the most perfect story in the book, is also the most conventional in method, insight, contrast. It is not for those reasons less true, but, although it is wildly funny, it is the only story in the book that is not much more than funny. In Manhattan a young Indian social worker from Madras is assigned to a gang of young toughs in an upper West Side settlement house, quickly dominates them with his natural charm and basketball skill, and channels their aggressiveness into demonstrations of passive resistance on the West Side Highway and the subway tracks. His last foray, before it is decided that U.S.-Indian relations would be safer if he went home, is an adventure with Chinese laundries and restaurants that satisfies his purposes and the gang’s instincts.

Faust must now be included among those new American authors who refute the lazy-minded assumption that the art of fiction is waning in the United States. Just the last five years have seen the débuts of—to name only some—Bruce Jay Friedman, Elliott Baker, Joseph Heller, Walker Percy, Edward Adler, Norma Stahl Rosen, Reynolds Price, and Donald Barthelme: writers of varying bent and intent, all of whom have proved rewarding to critical readers. (I presume to imagine that the drama critic Robert Brustein would shed tears of genuine joy if a theatrical season brought

the début of one dramatist equivalently gifted with any of the above; yet our Pulitzer prize-givers equated the state of fiction with drama last year by giving no award in either category.) Faust and some of the others have so far produced only one book; more are looked for because, among other reasons, single books often do not survive without full careers.

With the others, Irvin Faust gives us plentiful reason to hope. His stories are written in prose that is, generally, a distilled, heightened, accelerated vernacular: used in the service of wit, lean structural strength, perception, and compassion. Opening his first book is like clicking on a switch; at once we hear the electric hum of talent.

***The Group*, by Mary McCarthy (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, May 1965)**

The past few years have seen three instances of a remarkable phenomenon in American letters: a notably talented writer has published the least worthy book of his career and has enjoyed his biggest success with it. The three were James Gould Cozzens with *By Love Possessed*, Katherine Anne Porter with *Ship of Fools*, and, in the year 1963, Mary McCarthy with *The Group*. I believe that the very inattention that prevails generally toward the novel is responsible for the large response to these lesser works by gifted people. A public that has had no vital interest in the world of letters at its best hears of these writers peripherally for many years; has sampled previous works that perhaps they found (with Cozzens) too austere or (with Porter) too delicate or (with McCarthy) too surgical and cool. Then a book comes along from one of them which, certainly not by design, presents that writer's theme and note at a lower level. This increased accessibility causes the book to be hailed by popular reviewers and quasi-serious critics—who have been anxious for that author really to “break through”—as the work for which they have been waiting (as indeed they have).

Wide popularity is felt to be overdue this writer, who has hitherto been relatively neglected by the large public; and this accessibility through diminution, combined with a wave of sentimentality-cum-recompense, has made huge bestsellers of some authors' least notable works. None of these three books could have been so hugely successful if it had been devoid of all its author's best abilities; but one can question whether it would have been a bestseller if it had been up to its author's finest mark or if an authentically perceptive public had been reading him all along and were able to see the decline. (The better books by the same authors are still insufficiently read.)

This particular instance was notably distressing because, if one had been asked to name the author best qualified, almost diabolically so, to write a large-scale novel about the lives of young college women in the New York of the thirties, there would have been no alternative to Mary McCarthy. Our literature has a gap on this subject. There are many novels dealing with the proletarian position of those days, but the monumental novel of the intellectual and ideological life of the period was lacking. Unfortunately, it is still lacking.

McCarthy has long occupied an exalted and anomalous position in American letters. Possibly her reputation has exceeded her achievement because of her persona: we have so long been aware of this wickedly comic woman as a figure on the American scene that, as happened to a lesser degree with Dorothy Parker, her life gave added luster to her work. But there are certain irreducible accomplishments in that work that account for her unique position. She has been both representative and *sui generis*, concerned with literary, social, and political matters that concern many of

us, yet in her range of interests more diversified than any other American woman writer of her time.

Several of her books shrink on rereading: *The Oasis* is little more than a masquerade for those who know the maskers; *Cast a Cold Eye* is a collection of pieces that were not demonstrably meant to be collected; *A Charmed Life* is a clever charade that lacks sufficient depth to compensate, one may say, for its cleverness; it is tainted with authorial self-love. But the style of all of them is generally diamond-hard. Her two best previous books have additional virtues. Her first book, *The Company She Keeps*, a collection of stories about a central female character, sometimes reaches heights comparable with Katherine Mansfield. Her novel *The Groves of Academe* is so perfectly burnished, so relentlessly inimical to the second-rate, so justifiably murderous, that it stands as one of the best American intellectual comedies of the century.

There was reason, then, for thinking that the major intellectual novel of the thirties might well come from McCarthy. But what, in proof, is *The Group* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 378 pp.)? A highly readable, chatty, “woman’s novel,” knowledgeable rather than knowing, topically encyclopedic rather than thematically deep, flabbily satirical in texture rather than wittily sharp. She has followed eight members of the Vassar class of ’33 from graduation to 1940. She has developed no one of them as a protagonist, has lost several of them in the mazes of the book, and has insufficiently characterized most of them—substituting lists of attributes and dossiers for individualized life. A number of the episodes, particularly the sexual ones, are streaked with her mordant humor; the author has not lost her gift for making commonplace, but usually unnoticed, details pitilessly funny. There are some moving passages. She has considerable juggling skill in structure and is rarely tedious.

But what one senses most deeply from this book—by reason of its wavering style, its mountainous accretions of detail about clothes and furnishings and food, its lack of a resident and touching spirit—is that at bottom McCarthy has lost interest in the novel itself as a power. One may hazard a guess that, for her own reasons, she found herself committed to this particular book and fleshed out its skeletons in fulfillment of her obligation, not out of any irresistible drive to create or even to destroy. The style is the chief window on her weakness. It fluctuates pointlessly from the author’s voice to a character’s voice to a sardonic commentator mocking the girls’ voices. It reveals no clear viewpoint, no clear focus on the story, scene by scene, and it chooses the easy way out—especially easy for McCarthy—of spoofing: assuming a winking superiority. But it never really achieves the heights from which to look down. Rarely in the book does the author sound interested enough to satirize acutely.

What is even more disturbing is her refusal to close with her material on the level at which we might have expected her to confront it. The thirties was the most volatile and passionate decade of the twentieth century: an era of large dangers, considerable heroisms, social change at a pace that has not been equaled before or since. Those who lived through those ten years can be forgiven for thinking that the postwar years have been relatively stodgy in social action and pitch—at least until the recent eruption of the well-named Black Revolution. During and since the war, events have happened *to* people; during the thirties, there seemed to be an interaction. With this yeasty era McCarthy does little more than catalog its intellectual and political vogues (such as parlor Freud and parlor Marx), its newlyweds’ recipes, its party chats, the froth eddying on top of the catalytic currents. There are only hints of the tremendous labor unrest. There is no touch of the grinding poverty that overwhelmed

many people in this college-graduate set during those years. There is little sense of deep change. McCarthy had said, while writing this book, that it dealt with the failure of the Idea of Progress. One looks in vain for any character committed to that idea or even to the group as generally symbolic of it; the failure of this idea (if indeed it occurred) is not dramatized.

The author and others have hinted that the book also deals with the changing position of women in this century, but compared with Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (the best postwar novel on the subject), *The Group* is merely higher-grade, somewhat more daring magazine fiction. The short stories in *The Company She Keeps*, which were written during the thirties and which deal with that period, are, at their least, more penetrating than this book. *The Group* floats like a raft on the waves of its era, sometimes amusing as it bobs but, although it is large, too insubstantial to carry much freight.

***A Man and Two Women*, by Doris Lessing (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, May 1965)**

Doris Lessing, a South African writer who resides in London, has followed her somewhat jagged but magnificent novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) with a collection of short stories, *A Man and Two Women* (Simon & Schuster, 316 pp.). Lessing is inescapably comparable with Mary McCarthy. Both women, to judge by their works, are believers in sexual emancipation; both have had substantial interest in radical politics; both are concerned with the social position and dynamism of women; both have written fiction about the female world whose ideas are also the concern of their nonfiction. In every aspect Lessing's fictional magnum opus surpasses McCarthy's. Her delineation of the polarities of psychoanalysis and communism are the most telling since Arthur Koestler's *Arrival and Departure* and Joseph Freeman's *Never Call Retreat*. Her delineation of the female role as historical burden, mode of human exchange, and area of heightening fulfillment tends to reduce most of McCarthy's *The Group* to the talk in beauty parlors frequented by bluestockings.

None of the stories in Lessing's new collection is up to the level of the best in *The Golden Notebook*, yet many of them are unmistakably the work of the same fine artist. Several of them deal again with the place and prospects of women. For example, "One Off the Short List" tells of a determined sexual assault by a failed novelist on a successful young woman theatrical designer. Because she is his superior in relevant virtues, even in the sexual duello, she can see that to him this conquest is vindictiveness, and she can grant it to him in order to defeat him. "To Room Nineteen" tells of a woman, in the world's eyes happily married, who feels stifled by the very qualities that make the world judge her happy. "Between Men" is a progressively alcoholic dialogue between a man's ex-wife and his ex-mistress.

It has been remarked that rarely in Lessing's fiction is there a male character who seems completely worth the devotion that women give him and that the author's portrayals of femininity would have more resonance if some of the men were recognizable—by male readers, at least!—as worthier. But it must be remembered that a pendulum is swinging. Despite the fact that women have been writing for more than two centuries, it is only toward the middle of the twentieth century that the stranglehold of the male writer's concept of woman's social place has begun to loosen. Such a free mind as Montaigne's, not to mention the powerful but curmudgeonly mind of Dr. Johnson and the Teutonically organized mind of Hegel, saw woman as helpmate and the source of the ethos of the family but as little more.

Mere vengeance after long centuries of subservience seems a relatively small part of Lessing's purpose. She is no dogmatic feminist, blindly disregarding the biological and psychological and social elements that are inseparable from woman's fullest function in the world. She comprehends and enjoys her role as woman, savors its special powers, and knows that even the most perceptive of men can rarely understand their full extent. She is interested, however, in demolishing male delusions and deliberate falsehoods about woman and in exploring fully those privileges and possibilities that are due to women in a society of altering custom and morality.

But this collection is not tractarian in method or in subject. For example, there are excellent stories about the frictions in British class structure, marital tensions and electricities, and a particularly lovely story about a small girl and her brother on a South African farm ("The Story of Two Dogs"). The point of the story, affecting though it is, is superseded by a sense of nature flooding in, of the cosmos of vast energies sensed by children. Few of the nineteen stories in the volume are below the level of thought and passion and truth that have marked Lessing's writing. Only six of her previous twelve books have so far been published in the United States, but, happily, this situation is soon to be partly amended.

***My Life and Loves*, by Frank Harris, and *Fanny Hill*, by John Cleland (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, May 1965)**

In an era of enlarging but by no means unhampered liberalism in publishing, two more books of frank sexual content appeared in the early sixties that had previously been proscribed: one for decades, the second for centuries.

The first, Frank Harris's *My Life and Loves*, is surely one of the most interesting curiosities in literary history. This five-volume work, now published in one huge volume (Grove Press, 1070 pp.), appeared during the 1920s in various European countries and was subjected to police harassment when the author was old, unwell, and in financial straits. In his astonishing career the Irish-born Harris had been, among other things, a laborer on the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, a cowboy, a member of the Kansas bar, an editor of a sensational London newspaper, an editor of a superb London magazine, a poor novelist and short-story writer, an unreliable biographer, a convict (for one month), a blackmailer, and an acquaintance of so many notables in so many walks of life that to list them would be to catalog the eminent of the second half of the nineteenth century. He was also an avowed, uninhibited amorist; and it is the candid detail of his sexual chronicles that made difficulties for the publication of his autobiography.

Why are the memoirs of this failed novelist, irresponsible biographer, randy rooster, and infamous fantast worth reading? Because he was one of those rare beings who—in their totality, rather than in specifics—are geniuses. First, he had immense editorial gifts. *The New Statesman* has said that, under Harris's editorial direction, "*The Saturday Review* (in the 1890s) was beyond all challenge the most vital and stimulating journal in the English-speaking world." He had the perception to engage the young H. G. Wells to review novels (their point of agreement was admiration for the newcomer Conrad); to get Cunninghame Graham to write travel articles and Max Beerbohm to contribute satire; and to sense that a young playwright and music critic named Shaw would make a fine dramatic critic.

Second, he scintillated as a man. He was a huge reader, a celebrated conversationalist, a boxer, a wine and horse fancier, a prodigious traveler, an



indefatigable (if shady) business entrepreneur. He gave off fireworks in his lying, erratic career. Like Wilde in ebullience, though not remotely like him in polish, he was a man whom people thronged to know. Beerbohm did a drawing of himself and Harris at a table—Max elflike and attentive, Harris swarthy and effusive—and captioned it: “The Best Talker in London with one of his best listeners.”

Third, the quality of his amorous reminiscences makes his book a historically important attempt to set down autobiographically a whole man—probably with exaggeration, possibly with lip-smacking memory, but certainly in the belief that, with Rousseau and Casanova as somewhat milder exemplars, the time had come in literature for the whole man to be recorded, not merely the man that Mrs. Grundy thought admissible to print. Consider Harris’s situation at the time he was writing these memoirs: disregarded, probably aware that virtually everything he had written would disappear, that he had wasted his one golden gift: for serious editing. He had one last shot left in his locker, one way to carve a small lasting monument before he died: to tell all his story, with a completeness that would sweep nice nannies to the wall as his thunderous bass voice used to shiver polite drawing rooms. If the book contains lies and exaggerations, what on earth else could be expected from the autobiography of a liar and exaggerator?

Criticism of this work has been ample. Harris is at his best when he discourses. When he “writes,” it is generally in Edwardian fustian. He alternates the most graphic boudoir experiences with a pietism that he seems to think proves his good faith as a human being. His many opinions on politics and economics, *vis-à-vis* those politicians and economists whom he met or read, are of no value. But after all the criticisms are in, the work remains vital and engaging. To fault it, which is easy, is like objecting to the faults of Tchaikovsky from the perspective of an astringent, intellectual composer; the music will survive the criticism, though the criticism is doubtless sound. Harris’s zesty, outrageous, padded, ragbag final shot at immortality hits the mark: for it is not to be read as moral or immoral gospel, nor even as reliable period history, but as the last grand caper of a great intellectual rogue, a life-enticing character of a kind that succeeding generations have not seen. The world now seems too small to produce a Frank Harris. That is not a major loss, no doubt; but it is a difference. And this ultra-Rabelaisian autobiography-romance is a memorial to a fine, free-swinging lifestyle, savagely egotistical but highly engaging.

The critical reception of *Fanny Hill* was quite the reverse. John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, to give it its proper title, was published in 1748-49 and has had a troubled legal history. Its appearance in 1963 (Putnam, 228 pp.) was not unopposed by censorious groups, but from the literary view the most curious reaction was that of serious critics. Some of the same reviewers who objected to Frank Harris’s autobiography as sexual fantasy hailed Cleland’s work as an important novel. Sheerly as literary stylist, there can be no question that Cleland is immeasurably Harris’s superior. He has high eighteenth-century grace and wit, with a minimum of the furbelows of the time that sometimes make the modern reader feel he is choking to death on lace ruffles. But if ever there were a dream work, related to life only in imagination, it is this novel. Fanny’s life is exactly what a man would *like* a whore’s life to be. After some appropriate initial modesty, she responds happily to a life of prostitution, never becomes diseased (this in Hogarth’s London!), never becomes pregnant, enjoys amatory experiments exactly as a male companion would wish, and at the end leaves her profession for a perfect marriage. What hallucinated male could ask for more to satisfy simultaneously his prurience and his conscience?

The book is unquestionably pornographic: that is, it is written primarily to stimulate erotic sensations. This—to be as clear as possible—is *not* synonymous with obscenity, which is essentially a legal concept designed to protect society from corruption. No rational male or female is going to be corrupted by this novel; few such males or females will be unstimulated by it.

Judgment of the book should rest on considerations of its quality of execution and the appeal to the mature of its humor and venery. Those who are not interested ought to have the privilege of leaving it alone. Those who can see ridiculousness and gaiety in sex—as well as all its other attributes—and who can relish this exquisitely executed series of dreams ought to have the privilege of reading the book. V. S. Pritchett has well said:

The evocation of what sexual pleasure is in its particularity and in the imagination was [Cleland's] strong point. There he succeeded where better and higher-minded writers—D. H. Lawrence among them—have grotesquely failed. Cleland is good about sex because he is good about words. Elegance, energy, and kindness, he conveyed. The absurdity of *Fanny Hill* lies here also; where “pornography” does not brutalize, it idealizes. The book is, in this sense, an erotic fantasy—and a male fantasy, at that, put into the mind of a woman.

The irony in the accidentally simultaneous publication of these two previously suppressed books is that the author who professed to tell the truth was castigated for sexual fantasy; the author who was writing an obvious fantasy was hailed for the conviction with which he did it. Harris had against him his deserved reputation as a rascal and is close enough in time still to be irritating. Cleland had the attractions of antiquarianism and quaintness. But Harris's work is an attempt, admittedly maimed, to write a social and psychological history; Cleland's book is a felicitous glandular divertissement.

***By the North Gate*, by Joyce Carol Oates (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, May 1965)**

*By the North Gate* (Vanguard Press, 253 pp.), a collection of short stories by Joyce Carol Oates, is a distinguished début. With the first story, Oates reveals an interesting combination of storyteller's address with a sense of language that is refined without self-consciousness, imaginative without ostentation. But what is extraordinary beyond these assets is her ability—rare in a new writer, rarer still in a young woman—to treat large-scale emotions with a control that conveys them rather than diminishes them.

Oates was born in the western part of New York State, a region that shares more characteristics with the Midwest than with the metropolis, and most of her stories are laid in that region, in mythical Eden County, a place she has begun to place and people as Faulkner did Yoknapatawpha. The resemblance to the Mississippi master does not end there. It continues in her affinity for writing about a community cradled in some tradition, in her sense of the tragedy possible in little lives, even in her choice of such subjects as murder and mental defectives, racial tension, and sexual outburst. Like other artistic daughters of Faulkner—Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor—Oates is no mere mimic of her master. With her it is not imitation but artistically beneficent influence. In effect, if one takes such criteria as intensity of

pride, rural violence, and contained animus as defining the South in recent literature, Oates is the first “southern” writer in the North. One of the few failures in this collection of fourteen stories deals with other materials: “The Expense of Spirit” is about a drunken party of university people, which has become an almost obligatory subject for all writers who have taken graduate degrees.

But at the beginning of her writing life Oates has perceived important realities and rigors in the art of fiction and has subscribed herself to them with a wholeness that is exceptional. Such total subscription of self is no guarantee of great achievement, but no great achievement is possible without it. This conviction can be sensed in “Pastoral Blood,” for example, which is concerned with a wild outbreak by a bride-to-be, a last passionate rebellion against her engulfment by neat home, neat husband, neat Saturday-night love. The story would have been impossible as contrivance, no matter how skilled. It is thoroughly felt and articulated.

“The Fine White Mist of Winter” is a delicate, tense black-white story. (A deputy and a black prisoner, caught in a snowstorm, have to take refuge in a garage that is owned by blacks.) The situation is ironic enough to have undone a lesser writer by tempting him to make much of it; Oates simply uses it, concentrating on the reality of her characters and their feelings, letting the ironies of the situation arrive without compulsion—like a greater writer.

***A Moveable Feast*, by Ernest Hemingway (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, May 1965)**

Hemingway’s posthumous book, *A Moveable Feast* (Scribner’s, 211 pp.), is an invaluable and beautiful volume of memoirs of his life in Paris from 1921 to 1926, which he wrote between 1958 and 1960. Over and above the biographical treasures it contains, *A Moveable Feast* reassures us that we were not fools when we thought, early on, that Hemingway had greatness. He lived to be so tremendous an influence that both good and bad imitations surrounded him: what was worse, several of his later books seemed self-parody. This, plus his choice of subjects and his public persona, obscured an ineradicable fact: he forged a new prose style. Whatever faults may be found even in his best works, it cannot be forgotten that—with Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein, and Sherwood Anderson figuratively at his back—he rewrought the English sentence.

There is some posing in this latest book, there are affectations and plenty of the “good and brave and true” syndrome that has become the easy mark of satirists. There are opinions of certain people he met (Wyndham Lewis and Ford Madox Ford particularly) that seem narrow. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the book is a small poem by a famous writer in his sixties looking back to the time when he was happiest: not just because he was young then and very much in love with his (first) wife and his new baby, not just because they were in Paris, in the last days before it became a sort of Disneyland for American Express, and were poor, and without pretense *enjoyed* being poor. The book is specially moving because at sixty he knew that he had known at twenty-one that he was making a great artistic discovery, that he was fulfilling himself, that he might achieve fame and fine works in later years, but that he would never again feel so powerful and controlled and “on top” of his life:

“When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest.” That is a lovely, simple statement of his life at the time, all the more affecting for being in the retrospect of forty years. But of at least equal interest about Hemingway are his descriptions of the way he was shaping himself and his

work. Of the Luxembourg Museum:

I went there nearly every day. . . . I was learning something from the painting of Cézanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the dimensions that I was trying to put in them. I was learning very much from him but I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone. Besides it was a secret.

Vivid, personal, pitilessly candid—and no doubt prejudiced—portraits of a number of important persons occupy various chapters. Gertrude Stein: “She had beautiful eyes and a strong German-Jewish face that also could have been *Friulano* and she reminded me of a northern Italian peasant woman. . . . She talked all the time.” Ezra Pound: “. . . always a good friend and he was always doing things for people.” Ford Madox Ford: “He was breathing heavily through a heavy, stained mustache and holding himself as upright as an ambulatory, well-clothed, upended hogshead.” Wyndham Lewis: “He had a face that reminded me of a frog . . . and Paris was too big a puddle for him.”

For most readers, the keenest interest among these reminiscences of personalities will be in Fitzgerald because, in literary history and criticism, Hemingway has often been linked with Fitzgerald. Moreover, although we have had many views of Fitzgerald and have his letters about Hemingway, we have known much less of the latter’s views in reverse. For a chapter in *A Moveable Feast* called “Scott Fitzgerald” he wrote this epigraph:

His talent was as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly’s wings. At one time he understood it no more than the butterfly did and he did not know when it was brushed or marred. Later he became conscious of his damaged wings and of their construction and he learned to think and could not fly anymore because the love of flight was gone and he could only remember when it had been effortless.

The fact that has been lost in the publicity hubbub of the ensuing years is that when they first met, Fitzgerald was already a success and Hemingway was relatively unknown. (Fitzgerald wrote to Maxwell Perkins from France in 1924: “This is to tell you about a young man named Ernest Hemingway, who . . . has a brilliant future.”) Hemingway was interested in his successful contemporary and accepted an invitation to go down to Lyons with him and to drive back to Paris in the car that the Fitzgeralds had had to leave in a garage there. The story of that trip’s misadventures is told with dry humor and with illuminating revelations of Fitzgerald, such as the following bit of foreboding: “Scott was a man then who looked like a boy with a face between handsome and pretty. He had very fair wavy hair, a high forehead, excited and friendly eyes and a delicate long-lipped Irish mouth. . . . The mouth worried you until you knew him and then it worried you more.”

When they got back to Paris, Hemingway was fairly tired of the other man, but then Fitzgerald gave him a copy of the lately published *The Great Gatsby*:

When I had finished the book I knew that no matter what Scott did, nor how he behaved, I must know it was like a sickness and be of any help I could to him and try to be a good friend. . . . If he could write a book as fine as *The*

*Great Gatsby* I was sure that he could write an even better one. I did not know Zelda yet, and so I did not know the terrible odds that were against him.

Zelda was soon known to him, and his portrait of her is, to put it briefly, pitiful but devastating.

The book ends with the completion of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, and the premonition of the end of his first marriage. ("When I saw my wife again standing by the tracks as the train came in by the piled logs at the station, I wished I had died before I ever loved anyone but her.")

The surge of youth, the sovereignty of the imperial young artist who knows he is *right* in his work with a surety that years of experience and acclamation cannot equal or replace, was already at its prime. Irving Howe has said: "Hemingway was always a young writer, and always a writer for the young." In one sense that is a happy truth. In a worse sense it became true later when he failed to grow after forty, when his interests and his mode began to seem jejune. His posthumous memoirs confirm the happier of these truths.

***Going to Meet the Man*, by James Baldwin (New York Times Book Review, 12 December 1965)**

James Baldwin's collection of short stories, titled *Going to Meet the Man* (Dial Press, 249 pp.), invites little new comment because it contains little new work. Of the eight stories, five were published between 1948 and 1960, and none of the others was, I hope, written subsequently. The first two stories, "The Rockpile" and "The Outing," seem to be sketches for his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953. Freshness from the mint is no test of quality, but neither is quality proved by scraping the past in response to an author's present popularity.

It is widely held that Baldwin's best work is done in nonfiction. His exceptional polemic gifts, as writer and as speaker in the civil rights movement, have helped to fix that view relatively swiftly. That this view is just, that Baldwin is not the ironic artist-victim of the social-political movement in which he is fiercely engaged, is demonstrated again in this book.

Let us look first at the element that strikes the reader first: the prose. It is crusted with cliché. From the very first paragraph: "Roy felt it to be his right, not to say his duty, to play there." A glimpse of a barmaid: "When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore." A description of jazz: "Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen."

The triteness of the writing indicates a regard for this prose that is different from that for his essayistic prose. Would he, in an essay, call a cigarette a "sublimatory tube"? If it is asserted that this is early work and that his fictional prose has improved (which is arguable), then the willingness to publish this book, as is, indicates another difference of regard. Very little of this writing shows the incisiveness of phrase, the rhythmic control, the attractively serpentine and dramatic structure, the simple care, that mark Baldwin's other writing.

Insofar as the content of fiction can be distinguished from the writing, when we leave Baldwin's prose in these stories to consider their content, we move from the

question of sheer workmanship to that of basic talent. He often picks a good locus for a story (it is his best fictional gift), which is often sexual. Saul Bellow wrote of Baldwin's last novel: "All the important questions . . . are translated into sex." In this collection, accordingly, we have an American black with a white Swedish wife, a black girl with a white lover, a Southern sheriff who is impotent with his wife until he thinks of black girls and racial violence. These are all good blueprints for stories. But when the generally leathery prose allows us to ignore its rivets to see what it contains, we find chunks of material: chosen but not digested, assaulted but not taken: stories that lack the elements of personal truth and personal artifice that move material from concern into art.

"Come Out the Wilderness," for example, has an excellent point of tension: a sensitive black girl who lives with a white painter is virtually sentenced to a relationship with her commonplace black boss because she feels the futility of her liaison. But as the story moves to its climax, we are principally conscious of the conventional tapering of the spotlight, narrowing on her for a final emotional solo, of the sob that will—invariably—involuntarily escape her throat. The force of the subject and the sincerity of the author are thus swamped in the banalities of method. There is not a stroke in the story that is not stock in characterization or mechanically naked. It would be possible to hypothesize that occasionally Baldwin's intensity of concern paralyzes his art if elsewhere in his book—or in his novels and plays—one had been sufficiently convinced of his power to assimilate observation and experience and to illuminate them, instead of merely relating them to us in compassionate rage, touched up with literary-Freudian veneer.

This inadequacy is underscored in the one story here that deals exclusively with white people, "The Man Child." It is unimpelled by social anguish and unaided (as others are) by vividness of milieu. "As the sun began preparing for her exit, and he sensed the waiting night," the reader enters an account of a conflict between two farmers seen through the eyes of the eight-year-old son of one of them, who is eventually murdered by his father's friend. The tone of the piece is a throwback to the twenties of O. E. Rölvaag, the stark poetry of the soil that flourished in literary magazines until it collapsed in the Depression. This tone seems a refuge for an author dealing with unfamiliar emotion and environment. The failure of imagination is so thorough that it provides a clear view of the residually small talent in the other stories, there cloaked by social urgency and sexual detail.

All the above only supports my opening statement: there is little new to say about Baldwin's fiction. His strength and value, so far, are in the world of fact, not of art. Speaking of black writers, Ralph Ellison said: "What moves a writer to eloquence is less meaningful than what he makes of it." This was not written specifically of Baldwin, but, in my view, it applies to him.

***The World of Modern Fiction*, edited by Steven Marcus (New Republic, 19 November 1966)**

A few anthologies are literary events, like *The Modern Tradition*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson. Most anthologies are merely publishing events. The former are works with one or more features: they make available a lot of inaccessible or unappreciated work; they create profiles of extraordinary editorial taste or intellect; their materials are arranged, annotated, and analyzed so that, without distorting the original individual items, a new and valid composite work

evolves. But the majority of anthologies, the publishing events, are principally matters of useful or less useful merchandising. *The World of Modern Fiction* (Simon & Schuster), edited by Steven Marcus, is, disappointingly, only a publishing event.

So I begin with a marketplace matter: its price. Seventeen dollars and fifty cents! For two volumes totaling 1,035 pages, most unimpressively designed and produced, without jackets, and in a box with a one-color wrapping. It is true that, unlike the entries in many anthologies, each of the thirty-six items in the table of contents here is a copyrighted work for which a permission fee had to be paid; and some of those fees must have been substantial because several of the selections have previously been published as individual books (e.g., Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*). Still, the same publishers have just issued a sports anthology of 750 pages, containing over 125 items—almost all in copyright—at a price of \$10. The disproportion in price suggests not only that a better sale is expected for the sports book, but also that the publishers expect it to be bought by those who will read it. The Marcus price suggests that, in the publisher's mind, it was designed as an expensive gift for the Man Who Has Everything—Except Modern Fiction.

The price is not the only reason for this feeling. Compare another anthology from the same publisher, *A Treasury of the Theatre*, edited by John Gassner, a three-volume boxed set published in 1951, now selling for \$22.50. For that money, in more than 1,800 pages, the purchaser gets sixty-five plays (only a few of them are one-acters), an introductory essay to each section, an introduction to each play, and extensive bibliographical material. Gassner's work is helpful to anyone, and as far as any anthology can support such a claim, it is a one-set library for the intelligent non-specialist. The Marcus anthology, by contrast, has a ten-page introduction, but no further notes or comments on the individual works and no biographical or bibliographical help. (I shall have to look elsewhere for information about Dazai Osamu, whose interesting acquaintance I made here.) And, as noted below, *The World of Modern Fiction* is not a satisfactory one-set library on its subject.

One of Marcus's volumes is of American writers (sixteen of them), the other of Europeans (twenty). With the former he includes Isaac Bashevis Singer, who writes in Yiddish; with the latter he includes Dazai, a Japanese, and Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinian. Marcus says that their works have had much influence on American and European writers and have come to "belong" peripherally. Perhaps a better reason for including them is the title of the anthology. But that title leads to another, different criticism. Marcus of course knows that his title is audacious, but his audacity is inadequately supported.

Let us omit the tiresome reviewer's game, *vis-à-vis* anthologies, of second-guessing the selections; every anthologist recognizes in advance that every reviewer could select authors better than he can. But Marcus says that the fiction in his two volumes "represents the best kind of work done in the last twenty-five years." Even if I accept his list of authors without quarrel or quibble, I still think his statement is untrue. Does the short story "The Renegade" represent Albert Camus's fiction at its best? Is Norman Mailer best represented by "The Man Who Studied Yoga"? Or William Styron by "The Long March"? Or Doris Lessing by "To Room Nineteen"? Or Bernard Malamud by "The Magic Barrel"? Or Jean Stafford by "The Interior Castle"?

These authors and "the world of modern fiction" are represented at their best by their best novels, not by these shorter works. Marcus seems to have used the

anthologist's familiar back-formation: he has made up a list of outstanding authors of his period and field and then has chosen something from each—not by exclusively literary standards but also by the financial and physical demands of his project. True, he has included several short novels, including some that must rank with their authors' finest work: Alberto Moravia's *Agostino*, Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. True, there would be great economic and manufacturing difficulty in producing a collection that is really representative (like Gassner's). But neither does *this* anthology represent the world of modern fiction at its best. In his too-brief introduction Marcus says that he was hampered by any one reader's limitations, by scarcity of translations, by unavailability of permissions. But even within those limitations, the selection is unsatisfactory by literary standards—by those very standards with which Marcus's name is justly associated.

Marcus points out that the great age of fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries coincided with the age in which modern psychology was discovered or invented, and that the two ages were coterminous:

Modern psychology was the last extensively coherent vision, the last important system of explanation, of human experience to have been developed, and nothing has yet taken its place. . . . The last twenty-five years [make up] a period that includes the last phases of what can be called the era of psychology as well as the transitions into and first explorations of the open space of the post-psychological era. . . . Perhaps it might be fairer and more precise to call [these works] pre-existential rather than post-psychological.

It is fair and precise; and—unavoidably, one may say—his selections outline this new territory. But a number of his authors have better illuminated that territory in better work.

The question persists: for whom was this book made? Not for the student: the price and the almost complete lack of comment and reference rule out that use. Not for the experienced reader: he knows almost all the selections in both volumes. Not for the frustrated book-searcher: almost all the material is readily available and much of it in paperbound editions. For whom, then? One hears the possible echo of a publisher's editorial meeting a few years ago: "Say, what about an anthology for the man or woman who's too busy to read new fiction and who'd like an anthology to bring him up to date in one big bundle?"

There is no dogmatic reason why that reader should not have an anthology made for him, although one can speculate as to whether it will give him an appetite for modern fiction or whether it will make him feel that now he is all "caught up." But, however fine some of the contents may be, an expensive, genuinely representative gift book for that reader—very easy for a knowledgeable critic to assemble—is not the anthology that Marcus could produce.

***The Man in the Glass Booth*, by Robert Shaw (*New Republic*, 4 February 1967)**

Robert Shaw's swift, fascinating short novel *The Man in the Glass Booth* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 180 pp.) is, in a way, a critic's cross. It is hard to discuss it without revealing the plot, and it would be seriously unfair to reveal the plot; yet this gripping book is well worth comment. In most instances when revelation means



reduction, the work isn't much anyway. Or if it is a good work and it contains surprises (like Antonioni's new film *Blow-Up*), revelation is often irrelevant because the surprise is more important for the characters than for us. In a few instances, like Shaw's novel, a genuinely good work needs to have its surprises respected because they are part of a valid aesthetic design, in a double way. If you reread such a book (I have read this book twice), the memory of the surprises in the first reading enhances your foreknowledge the second time. But the experience would be quite different if you had had that foreknowledge from a synopsis.

This is Shaw's fourth novel; still, he is probably better known in the U.S. as actor than writer. He has been seen in the Broadway productions of Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* and Pinter's *The Caretaker*; also in the film of the latter, which was called *The Guest* (he played the lobotomized brother), and in other films including *From Russia with Love* (the close-cropped blond killer), *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (Ginger), and the current *A Man for All Seasons* (Henry VIII). His extraordinary talent as an actor is enough to put off a discerning reader. How many good actors have written good novels? The vocations—one of them basically private, the other basically exhibitory—seem antipathetic. Actors have written serviceable or good or even great plays; that seems logical enough. Many actors have published novels—often good actors and bad novels. (Peter Ustinov and Yvonne Mitchell come to mind.) There is at least one fine novelist who in early life was on the stage—Colette. But I can think of no good practicing professional actor, other than Shaw, who has written good novels.

*The Man in the Glass Booth* is a dramatic novel, yet it is not flashily theatrical. All that can safely be said of the story is that the protagonist is a very, very rich old German-Jewish refugee in New York, that the scene later shifts to Israel, and that the Eichmann trial—which, in the book, is already past—was Shaw's stimulus. (The title refers to a bullet-proof booth similar to the one in which Eichmann was kept during his trial.) The novel is not realistic, by the simple test of whether it could possibly happen. Neither is it fantastic. It is an arrangement of life-scale possibilities—in action and psychology—to form a moving allegorical whole.

The theme of the book is the preeminent moral question of the century: what has happened to evil? There are references to Hannah Arendt and her "excellent observations concerning the Clerk [Eichmann]." It would be a diminution of Arendt and a disservice to Shaw to say that his novel dramatizes the moral questions in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but he certainly tries to electrify in action various moral questions with which she dealt. Some of them (I am not summarizing Arendt or Shaw but noting what Shaw stimulates in the reader) are the following: can evil still be defined? In an age of increasing self-knowledge, which, as Yeats told us, rules out forgiveness, in an age when we know how antecedents and accidents of geography and time affect our actions, how can evil be abstracted as a definable quality? How, in fact, can it be attributed to others, exonerating ourselves? Because some evil acts are so much more enormous than others, does that make the smaller acts intrinsically less evil? In an age when the *acte gratuit* has achieved a certain philosophical grandeur, how incensed can we become at police dogs in Alabama and napalm in Vietnam? What is the status of sin? Is there still vitality in the idea of expiation? At a time when the "death of God" is chiefly an issue for clergymen trying to preserve their professions, can the concepts of sin and expiation survive? If not, in the future will everything be "good" or will everything be "evil"?

Concrete issues, raised by perennial causes, sometimes make new theories, however brilliant, seem merely theoretical. At such times traditional humanist values tend to prevail. Is this regrettable? Shaw, of course, does not answer any of these questions nor plumb them deeply. But with precise, slashing strokes he bares the nerves that make them tingle. His juxtapositions of incident are pungent without strain, ironic without self-relish.

Characterization is not an aim of *The Man in the Glass Booth*. There is only one characterization of any consequence—the central man—and he is as allegorical as the novel itself. Still, the book resonates with realities. We become aware quickly that it is the work of a percipient, austere selective intelligence. This intelligence is first conveyed by the style, which has the effect of a fusillade of wry, pithy telegrams interspersed with efflorescent arias. (But Shaw's ear for American speech is not flawless. One example among several: an American would say "covered with sweat," never "covered in sweat").

It seems relevant to mention that Shaw has already made a play of this book for production next season by the Royal Shakespeare Company of London. It will be directed by Harold Pinter, whose own play *The Homecoming*, a searing, macabre comedy of subterranean sex hatreds and fears, is currently being performed in New York by that company. Pinter's interest in this Shaw work, I would guess, is related to its astringency of form and its savage humor.

Shaw is a serious novelist who believes seriously in twisty plots. (I have read one of his previous books, *The Hiding Place*, which is an intelligent and mordant entertainment.) It is probably impossible to write a major novel out of that belief, but it is certainly possible to make good and relevant art. Shaw slips this cleverly wrought novel into us like a curved, razor-sharp knife between the ribs: right up to the hilt.

***A Sport and a Pastime*, by James Salter; *The Fetch*, by Peter Everett; & *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, by David Lodge (*New Republic*, 25 March 1967)**

Sex continues to make the world of love go round. Here are three novels in which sex is the principal theme or an important theme, written from three quite different views. All are relatively short novels, which may be a comment on their theme; none is a first novel, which is a small surprise.

The first view of sex is romantic, and therefore includes love. Definitions of love are notoriously difficult, and one possible definition—which fits this novel—is: a state of intense physical desire that, while it lasts, drastically affects values in one's life outside sex. James Salter's title, *A Sport and a Pastime* (Doubleday, 191 pp.), is taken from the Koran: "Remember that the life of this world is but a sport and a pastime." His novel attempts to substantiate this view in two senses: the sport and pastime of the lovers are traced diligently and delicately, and their story, under the eye of heaven, is seen as a sport of fate. A modern equivalent for "fate" might be the subconscious that predetermines the end of the story while the conscious is engaged in the sport.

Salter's novel is, in a way, a two-sided triangle. It deals with the affair of a young American, Phillip, and a French girl (the setting is France); but it is told from the viewpoint of another American, Phillip's friend, who imagines or reconstructs (this is deliberately unclear) the affair as it progresses from bedroom to bedroom and from one copulative variation to another. The material is sometimes clinical, but the effect is not, because of the *Doppelgänger* technique and the tone of Salter's writing.

For the first, possibly Salter was trying to build a profane Trinity, a body of Three, but the immediate effect is simply that the joy of the two lovers—the doomed joy—is so great that it spills over and poignantly envelops an empathic friend.

As for the writing, it obviates the standard café-and-garret *tristesse* because Salter skillfully uses a pointillist style: little dabs of color in rapid succession that generate emotional and visual rhythm:

The Porte de Breuil, its iron railings sunk into the stone like climbers' spikes. The women come up the steep grade out of breath, their lungs creaking. A town still rich with bicycles. In the mornings they flow softly past. In the streets there's the smell of bread.

Unfortunately, the novel forces its tragedy. We know that the affair will probably end painfully, but Salter appends an accident that wrenches the story out of destiny into coincidence. Still, the book is a frequently touching attempt to remake the universe in terms of a passion at its fullest, to fulfill the explanation of the affair that Phillip gives his sister: "It's changed my life. . . . It's changing my life. . . . It's like saying: stop all this, stop the noise; now, what should it all look like?"

I thought that Peter Everett's first novel, *Negatives*, was the willful work of a moderately talented man—that is, a stubborn contrivance by a man with some gift for language. His second novel, *The Fetch* (Simon & Schuster, 187 pp.), seems to me less well-written but more willful: a novel that grows out of a relatively superficial desire to write a novel rather than out of more potent sources. *The Fetch* is not unclever. The sheer bravado of the willfulness that created it—plus its literary sophistication and the tease of pathological sex—keeps one reading. The result, however, is puny.

The book is in that sub-species of the post-Dostoevsky era that descends from the insulted and injured through Kafka to the anguish of present-day vermicular types. (Frequently English, as in this case.) Everett, like several others in this school, moves from utterest naturalism into symbolist fantasy. His hero is a seedy, lonely, young motion-picture projectionist—thus an easy symbol of both the age's technology and its dreams. He has been dominated by his father, of course. (Sheer Kafka. To paraphrase Jefferson, every modern author has two native countries: his own and Franz.) After the father's death he goes home to a huge house, where he finds a mysterious, equally domineering old uncle. The uncle is a "fetch"—that is, a *Doppelgänger*—of his father. There is also a rude old servant with a sexy granddaughter who likes to be stripped and whipped.

It is all, in sober light, generally silly. The film references, amply at hand because of the hero's occupation, are sometimes ludicrous. At one point the girl, naked, is straddling him, plucking his eyebrows and painting him and, because he says he feels like a geisha, they commence to discuss a Japanese film. But too much sober light must not be thrown on the book or else one only begins to play the author's game by "reading" his symbols. (The huge forbidding house either as the world or the hero's mind; the uncle as the persistent, reproachfully successful father-penis; and so on.) What is chiefly noteworthy in this book, as in Everett's first, is the level of concoction. Forty or fifty years ago a man of literary ambition with little to say might have devised exciting plots or devoted himself to Zolaesque studies. Today he draws on rarefied psychopathological symbolism and, by virtue of this choice, defies you not to take him seriously. To me the book says little more than that Everett is alive in 1967, can write moderately well (except dialogue), and has the guts to

brazen out a hollow but up-to-date schema.

David Lodge, also English, has a quite different view of sex: both funny and Roman Catholic. *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 176 pp.) is about a London graduate student of literature, devoutly Catholic, the father of three who does not want to be the father of four and who fears that the bad news is imminent. The religious beliefs of the young couple are, appropriately, taken as given, so that we begin with their difficulties: the matters of rhythm control, temperature checking, and the whole game (as it is called) of Vatican roulette.

The atmosphere and tone are reminiscent of Kingsley Amis. The hero is a bumbler—highly intelligent, poor, sexually acute and agonized but nevertheless well-bred and reticent. Thus it is very much a class novel, about the new aristocracy in English fiction: the penurious, prurient scholar-gentleman. Lodge's novel relies every bit as much on the assumptions of this class structure as Jane Austen relied on hers.

The book has intellectual wit and farcical humor. The former rarely flags; the latter is well-planned for a time but wobbles toward the end, where the hero encounters the elderly niece of a dead author with literary relics to sell and with a hot-panting teenaged daughter who sets the price. There is some good feeling even in the verbal knife-play between the hero and his wife and friends, the feeling that even a hard knock like this possible fourth pregnancy is part of a civilized game for people who are capable of playing it—all of which sustains the social landscape for this new genus of high comedy. The book is a witty minor statement of contemporary hyperconsciousness.

For me, the sum of these three books was more rewarding than I expected. This is because, as it happened, I read all three in one day, and, although this was certainly not planned by the authors or myself, they became three parts of one large work, three contemporary aspects of the subject of sex. Despite the fact that two of these novels are slight and one (Everett's) is scarcely worth reading, their totality reaffirmed the mysteries—recurrent yet always elusive—of their common theme. And the sum of the experience was interesting. Perhaps, then, one way to read minor novels—to their advantage—is to group them by theme and to consume them in clusters.

***The Lost Legions: Three Italian War Novels* by Renzo Biasion, Mario Tobino, & Mario Rigoni Stern; and *The Outlaws*, by Luigi Meneghello (*New Republic*, 30 September 1967)**

It's always pleasant to read about Italians. Even their novels of World War II, a war that was as cruel for them as for anyone and more senseless than for most, purvey a certain amount of charm. This is not because of a set of laughing, singing *O Sole Mio* clichés; it is because most Italians seem fundamentally deranged in an irresistible way. By way of example, I lived in Rome through that city's coldest winter in a hundred years, with snow on the palm trees. One day I met the *portiere* of my apartment house in the stormy streets, bundled up, unhappy as a wet hen. He looked me straight in the eye and said stubbornly, "It never snows in Rome," *while the snow was falling on him*. I felt an urge to kiss him.

The characters in these two volumes of war fiction by four Italian authors—*The Lost Legions* and *The Outlaws*—are not to be patronized as "children at heart"; but in their range from superstitious peasant to agnostic intellectual, they register

some degree of subscription to the Italian *characterization* or else some degree of revolt against it. Part of that characterization is the sense of “genuine” role-playing, as displayed by my *portiere*. Part is in their sense of simultaneous unity and rivalry; in a nation that is, in fact, younger than the United States, each man thinks of himself both as Italian and as Calabrian or Piedmontese or Venetian or Brescian or whatever. (Luigi Meneghello writes of his partisan chief in *The Outlaws*: “Once or twice, he even made a speech, forcing himself to speak in Italian instead of dialect, so as to give gravity to what he said.”) And part of the Italian characterization, as has often been noted, is what can be called a Jewish sense of family concern and over-concern. Italians have more joy in them than Jews because they have been able to root their clannishness in *place* more continuously than Jews. (Jews wept for centuries for the lost Jerusalem; Italians weep for the beauty of Italy when they are in Italy.) But they share a feeling that any day spent out of the bosom of the family, or at least the familiar neighborhood, is questionable. Even in these narratives of disaster, of men uprooted and transported, the persistent sense of the Italian characterization comes through—and that this should be true in war fiction is in itself very Italian!

Most of these works were originally published in the early 1950s and thus are properly part of the postwar wave of Italian fiction that brought us Pratolini, early Berto, early Moravia, Pavese, and others. Excepting Mario Tobino, none of these newly arrived writers is comparable with their better-known contemporaries, but they all have points of interest.

The translation of *The Lost Legions* (Knopf, 412 pp.) was begun by Archibald Colquhoun, whose English version of Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* is deservedly famous. After Colquhoun’s death in 1964, the job was finished by Antonia Cowan, and finished seamlessly. There are three short books about World War II in this omnibus volume (not three novels, as the title-page says, but two collections of stories and one short novel). The first is a group of stories about the Italian forces in Greece, *The Army of Love*, by Renzo Biasion. Some of the stories are touching, and all of them are refinedly sentimental. Greek prostitutes loom large in this collection, women who seem *en masse* to be the source of Melina Mercouri’s public image. The idealization of prostitutes in Biasion’s book is presumably factual, but its factuality is one of the sentimental by-products of war. My favorite in this group is the opening story, “Alcozino’s Republic,” about four soldiers on detached duty at the end of a promontory (where they find a girl in a cave) who get delusions of autonomy and individuality—doomed, of course.

The best of these three short books is *The Deserts of Libya*, another collection of individual pieces, though these are sometimes related. Mario Tobino writes with an astringent compassion, a sort of dry-wine sullen glow, that gives the various deaths and tyrannies and farces a freshness: not of novelty but of perennial horror newly and truly realized. Tobino is a physician—a psychiatrist, in fact—and his stories are about the African campaign as seen by the Medical Corps. Two of them deal with a histrionic, incompetent commander named Oscar Pilli, and they treat him in a way that Gogol might have admired. “A Lieutenant” is a taciturn, touching little death-song. “Outside Tobruk” is not even a story, just a descriptive sketch of an encampment, but it is a beautiful, rueful landscape with moving figures. Throughout his book Tobino makes most painful a theme that is in all these authors: that these were soldiers without will or even *false* purpose, victims of an *opera buffa* government, except that the blood was real. In the power of the Fascist bombast and strut (which were Italian) were the “peasants dreaming of home” (also Italian),

inventing little distortions of reality to make their lives bearable, like my *portiere*.

The short novel in this volume is *The Sergeant in the Snow*, by Mario Rigoni Stern, which deals with the Russian war. This campaign by the Italian army is usually scanted in memory, if not in history, but 230,000 men were sent to Russia. Toward the end of 1942 they were forced to retreat about 300 miles in temperatures of 30 to 40 degrees below zero. The losses were 90,000 missing and dead, 45,000 frostbitten and wounded. These bare statistics, supplied by Stern in a foreword, are, unfortunately, almost as effective as his novel. His fiction is intended to make the facts more intimate and vivid, but he adds so little in character or insight that we feel we are tracing an honest, adequately carpentered articulation of material already given us in potent capsule.

Meneghello's book, *The Outlaws* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 272 pp.), written in 1963, suffers from a similar conflict between fact and fiction. (It is smoothly translated by Raleigh Trevelyan, though without the elegance of Colquhoun.) It was published in Italy as a novel but, in this version revised by the author, is not so called here. The residual gap between fact and fiction is wider than the author's change of labels can take care of; the result is a sometimes interesting narrative that tries unsuccessfully for the increments of fiction. Meneghello tells the story, presumably autobiographical, of a student discharged from the army when Mussolini falls, who then joins the Resistance in the north and who sees partisan activity in all its quiet grimness. When the author sticks to his account, it grips the way that histories of these exploits always do. When he attempts to give it a profound "European" artistic-philosophic texture, he often gets hollow:

Not that there's anybody in heaven to listen to a mass, but it's like talking aloud when one is alone, it helps.

She asked me what you do for a profession, with a philosophy degree, and I said that you could teach, but usually those who knew philosophy did not teach it, while those who taught it did not know it.

Luckily, this watery café-sagacity is occasionally varied with some valid percepts. The narrator has not joined the Resistance out of heroism, he has almost drifted into it, and it is only subsequently that he understands his action:

Now I see quite well that what we wanted above all was to punish ourselves. The ascetic, rough part of our experience meant this. Confusedly it seemed to us that somebody must at least *suffer* for what had happened in Italy; in certain moments it seemed a personal exercise in mortification, in others a civic duty. It was as though we had to carry the weight of Italy and its troubles; and this was appropriate because it often happened that we were literally carrying things. I have never carried so much in my entire life: flour, explosives, enormous cooking pots, cases of incendiary bombs, ammunition. The loads were grotesque.

Passages like this, the most *Italian* ones, are the best in the book. And again, in such passages, there is a reminder of Jewish flavor. This last quotation, give or take a few nouns, might have come from Bernard Malamud.

***The Best American Short Stories, 1967*, edited by Martha Foley & David Burnett (New Republic, 25 November 1967), and *Prize Stories, 1972: The O. Henry Awards*, edited by William Abrahams (New Republic, 8 April 1972)**

The annual anthology called *The Best American Short Stories* has been published regularly since 1915. As I had not read a volume in eleven years, I felt it was time to do so, and I went through the latest: *The Best American Short Stories, 1967* (Houghton, Mifflin, 331 pp.). A pretty depressing experience.

There are twenty stories and three of them seem to me good—one of the three very good. That would be a fairly happy average when reading magazines, but this is supposed to be a selection of the best in the year's magazines. My favorite in the collection is "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant," by Robert Hazel, a violent, sharp-eyed story of two Southern literary men living in New York—one an editor, the other a college teacher. Hazel has a viewpoint and a voice, and his story has a hurtling emotional dynamics.

Two other stories are satisfying. "Trepleff," by MacDonald Harris, makes sensitive use of an amateur performance of *The Seagull* in Michigan to interweave the lives of the director and the two people playing Nina and Trepleff. The other story is, coincidentally, also about an actor, a professional, and is by Arthur Miller. The life of this actor, middle-aged and compromising and uneasy, is contrasted with that of an eager, politically-minded young actor and with the protagonist's father, an invalid but still a vital man. There is some flavor of Bellow in it and there are reminders of Miller's previous father-son confrontations in *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *After the Fall*; still, in itself, "Search for a Future" is valid and moving.

But the other seventeen stories! There is a fake Katherine Mansfield (by Ethan Ayer), a fake Hemingway (by George Blake), a fake Eudora Welty (by Berry Morgan)—even a fake Satyajit Ray film in prose (by David Rubin). There are two stories that are merely extended jokes: a hillbilly joke by Jesse Stuart and an *idiot savant* joke by Carol Sturm. There is a story by Henry Roth—his first published fiction, I think, since *Call It Sleep* (1934)—so flat and foolish that it is hard to believe that the *New Yorker*, even though its fiction has fallen off badly, would have published it if the author were unknown. (It concerns an American couple who, with surveyor's instruments, locate a spot in Seville where the Inquisition once burned victims and who lay a wreath on it.)

More nullities. There are two stories of moral discovery that might have been daring in 1925. In one, by Raymond Carver, a man is nagged by suspicion of his wife's infidelity a few years back, forces her to confess, explodes, discovers he still loves her. In another, by Hugh Allyn Hunt, an adolescent discovers differences and similarities between a whore and a nice girl. There are stories of model-and-articulation: we are given an incident or symbol not directly related to the hero's life, and then we see how the hero's life follows the pattern of the model. In a story by Lawrence Lee, the fate of a donkey is observed by an American couple on a ship in the Greek islands; and we see that the donkey's fate is a symbol of their dilemma. In Kay Boyle's story an incident with a horse on a freight airplane, which the adolescent hero reads about, has a relation to the boy's life. In Robert Traver's story—a piece so crude and stupid that it manages to disgrace an already undistinguished book—a wily brown trout is used as a symbol of the hero's independent spirit. (This is evidently the year of the Animal Symbol.)

There are other disasters, but let us turn now to the editors, Martha Foley and

David Burnett. In their foreword they call the short story “America’s most distinctive and distinguished kind of writing” and say that it “has flourished during the past year.” On the evidence they provide, it is difficult to agree about the flourishing. But perhaps this is a matter of their final choices, for in their list of Distinctive Stories of the past year that they have not reprinted are such names as Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, George P. Elliott, Irvin Faust, Roy Bongartz, Philip Roth, John Updike, and Eudora Welty. We must assume that none of these stories was up to the level of that brown-trout number.

The first part of the editor’s statement is at least equally questionable. Is the American short story more distinctive and distinguished than the American novel? There is certainly no story in this book—possibly excepting Hazel’s—that is up to the level of the novels published in the past year by Victor Kolpacoff, Anne Richardson, Carlene Hatcher Polite, and Christopher Isherwood (as American as Nabokov), no writing as distinguished as that in Frank Conroy’s autobiography, *Stop-Time*. This does not prove anything about the stature of the short form as against the long—who would want to “prove” anything?—but it does tell us something more about the editors. More, that is, than that this latest volume of theirs ridiculously misrepresents the current level of American imaginative writing.

Who reads short stories? A case might be made that fiction in magazines is even less thoroughly read than poetry, and that’s getting pretty low. Possibly I’m representative. I often read the poems, but here is a collection of short stories from recent magazines, ten issues of which had passed through my hands, and I had read only one story.

True, the last previous anthology of new stories I read was the wretched 1967 volume of *Best American Short Stories*, an experience that prompted me to keep on leafing, rather than explore, when I came to stories in periodicals, particularly by authors unknown to me. The 1972 volume of *O. Henry Prize Stories* (Doubleday, 272 pp.) doesn’t bring light where all was darkness, but I’m certainly going to leaf more slowly in future.

There are eighteen stories in the book; five of them are good, and two or three more are interesting. That’s a high proportion for material selected out of twelve months (July 1970 to July 1971). William Abrahams, who chose the stories, also awarded the prizes to the first three. There’s no serious quarrel with his choices, but my own favorite in the book is his third prize-winner. “Small Sounds and Tilting Shadows,” by Judith Rascoe, is about an American girl who lives for a time in a borrowed apartment in London and conceives a fantasy life with the absent owner as one episode in the realization of her own identity. It begins:

When I was twenty-one I was half-crazy—I spent myself on that, as if madness were entailed in my maturity. . . . When I was half-crazy I went to Paris, intending to be old.

I have read long novels, pushed trembling at the reader as chalices of sensitivity, that held less than Rascoe’s fine-spun story of a haunted inner landscape.

The second prize-winner, whose name is on everyone’s list of everything these days, is Joyce Carol Oates. I was an early enthusiast of Oates and still think her first collection of stories, *By the North Gate* (1963), contains some of the best American writing of the ’60s. A lot of her work since then has to be damned with the



word “honorable”; *Them*, for one example, is a novel that would have been good enough for a writer who had not begun as she did. Sometimes her work is worse than that, grimly arty—like her story in the current *Harper's*, a lurid trick whose time-sequence is chopped up to give it weight, as pretentious directors sometimes do with films. But the Oates story in this book, “Saul Bird Says: Relate! Communicate! Liberate!,” is full of sharp observation, distilled and heightened. The material has no surprises. A radical university teacher turns out to be an egocentric devourer of other people. But Oates slices into the material at odd angles to make a prism of bright, disturbing reflections.

The first-prize story is John Bakti's “Strange-Dreaming Charlie, Cow-Eyed Charlie,” which Abrahams says he has read “numberless times.” I read it twice and will probably never read it again, but I greatly enjoyed Bakti's dreamy portrait of a New York medical student floating just out of reach of ambition, of the girl he wants, of a shape for his life.

Two other stories are especially notable. James Salter's “The Destruction of the Goetheanum” tells of an encounter in Basel between the American narrator and a middle-aged runaway couple, also American, he a self-esteemed unknown genius, she the support of his belief. At a cool enhancing remove, we glimpse desperate convictions, desperate love. Margery Finn Brown's “In the Forests of Riga the Beasts Are Very Wild Indeed” is about a cardiac patient, an American woman who has had a wide-ranging and deep-feeling life and who is now feeling her existence straiten as death-fear corrodes her dignity.

All five of these stories have initially offensive titles, like “serious” TV dramas, but the offense turns to aptness as one reads. Four of them, one way or another, involve Americans in Europe. Well, V. S. Pritchett says that a short-story writer, as opposed to a novelist, “needs restlessness.” These stories, Abrahams remarks, “have turned away from public and toward private concerns, because the external condition of modern life, as distinct from the condition of a particularized life, can be taken as a shared assumption of writer and reader.” It is not to argue with Abrahams to add that, just *because* of those assumptions, these writers feel it necessary to re-create the world in opposition to those assumptions and to do it in the only place available, inside. The inner life in these stories is, generally, not withdrawal but alternative.

Other stories, other tones. Donald Barthelme's “Subpoena,” a well-turned but predictable anti-technology-and-bureaucracy bit, is one of his neater stories, thus one of his less rewarding. Herbert Gold's “A Death on the East Side” depicts the last days of an exemplar of that particularly distasteful modern phenomenon, the educated and intelligent sharpie who uses his cultivation as hustle. It's accurately done, but the space between subject and viewer is short, lacks sufficient perspective and comment.

Then, of course, there are the consciously literary stories. Elaine Gottlieb's “The Lizard” and Rosellen Brown's “A Letter to Ismael in the Grave” falter through that consciousness, but at least they are genuinely felt and show some contemporary sensibility. Much less tolerable are the dated and precious stories by J. D. McClatchy and Charles Edward Eaton. (Sample of Eaton: “Marjorie began to look like a damp peony dipped in some social fountain of dismay.”) I hoped, as I plowed through, that these stories, particularly the Eaton, would turn out to be Jamesian parodies, but I couldn't find the edge to look around. Both pieces just purr and purr like plump English instructors after two martinis.

No better are the (apparently obligatory) Rustic Grotesques. Jack Matthews

narrates a story in rural dialect (Opening line: “Melvin Combs, his wife she died”) that is supposed to tug the heart but tugged my gorge. Patricia Zilver writes a Nevada black comedy about an eccentric old man who has tenuous grounds for a suit against a big corporation and who shoots his fat wife when she destroys the odd bit of evidence. Why not let Irvin S. Cobb rest quietly in his grave?

I might have thought that Abrahams was straining to include the rural for balance, and even that American writers are straining to write nonurban stories for the same reason, except for Mary Clearman’s “Lambing Out.” This story of a winter on a sheep ranch is not really memorable, but it has serious commitment to its subject as more than “color.” Clearman has little freshening insight into her basically familiar material, but there is something touchingly decent in the gravity with which she treats experience.

Abrahams points out that some of the stories, like Rosellen Brown’s, come from large-circulation magazines where such writing might not have been expected in the past, and he speculates that television may be draining off appetites for the “slick” story. If so, it’s only fair, because television is certainly draining off the life of many magazines, and those that remain ought at least to be able to do something other and better.

Still, the publishing situation for serious short fiction, which was never precisely happy in the U.S., can hardly be said to be improving. In the face of that fact, this book comes as a doubly pleasant surprise, on the whole. First, it shows that assumptions—mine but by no means only mine—about the level of magazine fiction were probably too dim. Second, it shows that, despite the tightened publishing situation, at least some good writers were intent on *conceiving* in short-story terms. Some good stories may get written because they occur to their authors as stories, but imagination and observation don’t operate in a vacuum, and if there weren’t some deep affinity—love—for the form, so many stories might not “occur.”

Reading this book was, finally, a cheering experience. Even those of us with a rooted interest in the art tend to think of fiction as “the novel.” Patently slipshod of us. If five out of eighteen works were enjoyable in every art, we all might get a little nervous at our good luck, but we’d be happy.

### ***The Cat*, by Georges Simenon (*New Republic*, 9 December 1967)**

As one who has read every book written by Georges Simenon . . .

*There* is an opening remark! But who could make it? Possibly Madame Simenon and probably some Ph.D. candidate; surely no other. To be a contemporary of Simenon’s is to live beside a fresh-flowing stream. If, like me, one does not read French, the stream is only a branch at the delta; still, it flows pretty freshly. I dip into it once in a while because it is there. Not the Maigret series—even Simenon cannot interest me in detective stories—but, since there are only seventy-one Maigrets, this leaves 120 other novels to choose from, counting only the books published under Simenon’s name. (In his youth, like Balzac, he wrote numerous novels under pen names, to train himself.)

His latest novel to appear in the U.S., *The Cat* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 182 pp.), is short, as are most of his books. In my one meeting with Simenon, fifteen years ago, he said that a novel ought to be like a play or a film—you ought to be able to get through it in one sitting. He writes them (figuratively) in one sitting. His working time for a book, quoted in a recent interview, is twelve days, which means he has slowed

down. When I asked him how long it took to write a novel, he said “eleven days.” No hesitation, no “about” or “usually”; a flat “eleven days.”

There are two points of view about Simenon. One is that he suffers unjustly in serious critical estimation because he writes so much, that his huge output gives him an undeserved lightweight ambience. The second is that he is somewhat overpraised, that he is more of a phenomenon than a serious artist. *The Cat* supports both views.

As for the first: this new book, like most of his books, is a work of marvelous skill. It is spare, gripping, relentless, calm. It is a wonder of suspense, especially considering the simplicity of its materials. The story concerns a Parisian couple in their seventies (the second marriage for each) who have literally stopped speaking to one another. They have exchanged only terse written messages, ever since (as he believes) she murdered his cat and he, in retaliation, plucked the tail feathers of her parrot, which subsequently died. These ludicrous facts are put forth so succinctly, even tensely, that this tiny domestic squabble becomes a credible stifling cosmos, an inescapable, seemingly rational madhouse. Very little happens. We learn who the pair are, the facts of their daily lives and their first marriages, and how their spouses died. In the “present” the wife encourages the visits of another old woman, whom the husband dislikes, so he moves out—permanently, he thinks, but it lasts only a week.

He spends that week with a woman who keeps a bar, an agreeable soul with whom he has copulated occasionally and casually throughout much of his life. There is a typical Simenon touch when the old man arrives at the bar and finds it difficult to explain to the woman about his troubles at home:

He was embarrassed and dared not go into detail. “After all, a man does have his dignity, you realize. . . .”

She laughed to herself. She knew men better than he and knew from experience that when they talk about their dignity it means that things are bad.

But a few days later he sees his wife standing on the sidewalk opposite the bar, just standing there, silently supplicating. She is there again the next day. At the end of the week, he goes home—to their mutual silence. Not long after, he comes back from a walk one day to what he has been expecting-dreading; she is lying on the floor and the silence is sealed.

Simenon once said, in a *Paris Review* interview, that the difficulty of communication between two people

is one of the biggest tragic themes in the world. When I was a young boy I was afraid of it. I would almost scream because of it. . . . That is a theme I have taken I don’t know how many times. But I know it will come again.

In *The Cat* the theme is distilled to a grotesque essence; the book externalizes, in sharp symbols, an inner aspect of the human condition. Simenon’s sentences (as translated here by Bernard Frechtman), falling into place like small unbreakable bricks, build the couple’s cell, and then the inner wall between them.

But there is the other viewpoint about Simenon. The most extraordinary aspect of *The Cat* is that it is No. 120. (Not counting the Maigrets or the “warm-up” novels.) It is a good but small piece of work, in ambition and achievement. If it were the author’s first book, or his first book in five years, or even his first book in a year, it

would of course be no less good but would seem much less remarkable. The wonder of Simenon is inseparably twofold: that he writes so much *and* writes as well as he does.

Among the dozen or so Simenons that I have read, none has been less than good and none has seemed to me imperishable. I wonder how much of him will last, how he will look to future generations who read those of his books that survive. Less impressive than he does to us, I would guess. Possibly the greatest attribute of Simenon's is that he is our contemporary: that the phenomenon is happening while, so to speak, we watch.

***Aden, Arabie*, by Paul Nizan (*New Republic*, 11 May 1968)**

*Aden, Arabie* (Monthly Review Press, 159 pp.) is the delayed American début of a neglected twentieth-century French writer. It has been put into excellent English and has an introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre almost half as long as the (short) book itself; the introduction and the text seem to combine into one work in a rare and remarkable way. The best compliment to the translator, Joan Pinkham, is that the book reads as if it had been written by two exceptional Frenchmen who could write exceptional English. Anyone who wants to certify his gratitude to Pinkham can glance at the previous translation of Sartre's introduction, published in his collection *Situations*. (One curiosity: the running heads on the new version give Sartre's first name as John-Paul. Surely not Pinkham's doing?)

Paul Nizan, born in 1905, was a school friend of Sartre's, published *Aden, Arabie*, his first book, in the early thirties, wrote several others, and was killed in 1940 in World War II. For the re-publication of *Aden, Arabie* in 1960, Sartre wrote his introduction, a brilliant mature essay on a brilliant immature book. Sartre uses their youthful friendship, Nizan's death and disprizing, their hopes and hopelessness, all to give richness to Nizan, rather than to exploit him as an "occasion" for himself. The double impression one gets from the introduction is that Sartre is pleading to redress Nizan's neglect and, almost in a surreal sense, is trying to surround Nizan's book with the powers that, he thinks, Nizan would have had if he had lived.

*Aden, Arabie* is nominally a travel book. In 1925, at the age of twenty, Nizan spent a year in Arabia. Sartre tells us—the author does not—that Nizan went as a tutor; that he was the son of a railroad engineer, that he had attended lycée and the École Normale with Sartre, that the two had become fast friends, attracted by each other's intellectual responses and imaginations and growing disgusts with French society. (Possibly also because each had a cast in one eye—in opposite directions!) At fifteen Nizan "asked the Church for immortality [says Sartre]. Too late. Once faith is lost, a feeling of disgust is not enough to bring it back." Nizan's growing horror of bourgeois "mutilations" drove him to get out of France to get a look at himself, the world, and his possibilities in it for sanity and justification. When he returned from Arabia, he joined the Communist Party.

"What could the Party give to this man who had been skinned alive . . .?" asks Sartre:

We must be scrupulous about asking this question. I am telling the story of an exemplary life, which is just the opposite of an edifying life. . . . To the troubled young man who wanted to save his soul, Marxism offered absolute ends: play midwife to history, bring forth the revolution, prepare Man and the

Reign of Man. . . . The Party socialized him painlessly. Its collective being was none other than his individual person. He had only to *consecrate* the swirling eddies within him.

Between 1929 and 1939, during which Sartre saw little of him, Nizan published this book and several novels and was a writer on foreign policy for *Ce Soir*. In September of 1939 the Nazi-Soviet pact finished Nizan's Party membership. After he left, the Party covered him and his books with abuse. (Simone de Beauvoir has noted that, in Louis Aragon's postwar novel *Les Communistes*, there is a highly derogatory fictional portrait of Nizan.) The abuse has only relatively recently been swept away. Nizan is now so far restored that *Aden, Arabie* is one of the dozens of books mentioned by the young revolutionaries in Godard's new film *La Chinoise*.

So this is no ordinary run-of-the-nervous-system book of travel sketches by a sensitive literary type. Its opening line is "I was twenty. I will let no one say it is the best time of life." It is a work of revulsion, withdrawal, choice, and engagement. Nizan saw that there were several avenues of escape from bourgeois suffocation. Modernized religion: "Curés, in order to gain acceptance by the young, explained that prayer and poetry are only different faces of the same act." Aestheticism: "Literature was raised to the level of a tame god who was always available for communion." Sex: "I lost myself with her in a country without contours, closed in by the great, vertical panels of the night." He chose instead to leave that society literally as a help to perspective.

Nizan describes Aden in flashing, impressionistic strokes: "Aden hums like some great, shaggy animal that has rolled in the dust and is covered with flies and gadflies." He saw men there, Europeans included, as if the sun had baked them down to essentials:

Since art, philosophy, and politics were absent because they served no purpose, you did not have to make any correction for them. You could see the foundations of Western life, men were stripped naked like anatomical models: for the first time I saw people who did not require a philosophy of clothes.

But within six months or so, this reduction began to affect him differently:

In Aden this idleness is terrible, one is deprived of everything, even of the semblance of art and philosophy. So life is reduced to the shallowness of the past and the dust of a future made up of habits and systems. . . . A chess match in which the living lose to the dead.

Three things had caused the change in Nizan, had helped him to make the choice for which he had come, and to make it relatively quickly. The first was a perception of the sterility of sightseeing:

There is only one valid kind of travel, and that is the journey toward men. . . . As for poetry, that last mineral element of travel, let it sink into the oblivion of the seas. . . . Once you have stated that there are places in which you die of cold and others in which you dry up with the heat, and that it is only possible to live easily between the two, there is not much more to be said about the poetry of earth.

Second was the questioning of his need to travel to understand himself:

Did I have to go to Aden to seek out the secrets of Paris? . . . But I have no regrets. These truths have stared me in the face, they were revealed in such a dazzling light that I am certain never to lose them. I was too near my end to regard them as the errors of youth. No one will ever make me believe that growing up is the answer to everything. I still think that the chances of my coming upon these truths within the walls of the Latin Quarter were slim.

Third, and contradictory, was the clarity with which he had swiftly come to see, through physical withdrawal, what was inescapable and would always be dangerous:

A French citizen comes back with me, or rather, there was a double waiting for me in Marseille and he fell into step with me. I am going to do everything possible to lose him. He represents everything that fell away from me when the name of my province was Hadhramaut.

This book is not a diary, it is a retrospect of experience; still we feel that at the time he was experiencing it, Nizan knew he was going through a necessary but predictable series of actions that would end, after the justification of trial and proof, where he wanted to end.

Some of the book is arrantly juvenile. The “revelations” about the vacuity of a money-chasing life are not only trite, they are shallow, as is one of Nizan’s other chief themes: “All men are bored.” Plenty of men are not bored, and, for many of them, life consists of making money. All of us see the world subjectively—that is, those who bother to “see” it at all; but experience makes us aware of divergences and modifications. Nizan was not yet old enough to give much weight to anything but his own reactions. It is here that Sartre’s introduction serves his dead friend particularly well by putting his juvenilities in the perspective of his whole life (short as it was), of his accomplishments and his fate. *Aden, Arabie* is an imperfect but fascinating introduction to a career—appropriately imperfect considering the author’s age, certainly appropriately heated by intensity and by its manifestation of what Susan Sontag calls “the venerable preoccupation with sincerity peculiar to French letters.”

There is also something larger. This book is not only more than travel literature, it is more than another example of the French confessional tradition. It is a sharp instance of the revolutionary upheaval specific to France, though certainly not exclusively French, for well over a hundred years. At least some proportion of intellectual youth, often students, have been battling against the constrictions of inhuman and dehumanizing life—both bourgeois constrictions and radical disappointments—from (say) 1848 to the French and Italian and British and Czech and West German students of today. In the U.S. the movement took somewhat longer to boil because of the newness of the country and because of professed principles of humane concern. (Although Henry James, Sr., wrote in 1853 that “democracy . . . is revolutionary, not formative. . . . Its office is rather to destroy the old world, than fully to reveal the new.”) The surge of youthful revolt will always be wilder and hotter than any mechanism of politics or any organization of society can possibly be, so it will always breed its own disillusion. But that age which is “not the best time of life” has to be depended on to provide outrage and disillusion. *Aden, Arabie* is a record of a young man’s discovery that the world’s fact is far behind his private imagination.

Sartre says that Nizan's two novels *Antoine Bloyé* and *La Conspiration* are masterpieces. I hope we shall soon have them in English, perhaps translated by Joan Pinkham. Meanwhile, beautifully launched by Sartre, there is this book, too dismissive, too intolerant, too *young*: still, a small hot flare that shows us a young man hurling himself against those same old brass-studded doors.

***West of the Rockies*, by Daniel Fuchs (*New Republic*, 15 May 1971)**

Daniel Fuchs has become two legends in his lifetime. One, he is supposed to be a "lost" author. Fuchs's three Brooklyn novels, published in the '30s, are thought by some to be neglected masterpieces. Two, he is supposed to be a classic example of talent ruined by Hollywood. In the late 1930s he went out there and, except for some stories, has written only scripts-to-order since. (He won the Academy Award in 1955 for *Love Me or Leave Me*.)

Neither legend seems valid. I read the novels—*Summer in Williamsburg*, *Homage to Blenheim*, and *Low Company*—when they were re-published in one volume in 1961, and I agree with Stanley Edgar Hyman that "although they are very well worth reading . . . Fuchs was never quite bold *enough* . . . never achieved a firm center for his sprawling natural history." Legend Two is disproved by the appearance of *West of the Rockies* (Knopf, 166 pp.), which is pretty much on a level with the fiction he wrote thirty-five years ago. Allowing for changes made by time and experience, this new short novel is Fuchs continued, unruined, as he was before the Hollywood decades.

The film world is the setting. The two chief characters are an agent and a (female) star. Here are the very last words of the book, which tell us that everything we have just read took place

some twelve years ago, when television was comparatively new and the big picture studios still throbbed, the collapse yet to come, the people enmeshed in their concerns, those pursuits, dreams, and diversions which occupy us so that we are each of us precious to ourselves and wouldn't exchange ourselves, the being in us, with any other, those wonderful moments which as they happen go by almost unnoticed but which return again and again in our thoughts to bemuse and warm us, the stir of smoking mountain panoramas, the ache of sweet summer days, of trees in leaf, of being in love, this prize, this treasure, this phantom life.

I've quoted at length because this sentence sums up so much of Fuchs's intent, virtues, and strain. He knows the facts of Hollywood, but his interest is in the demons beneath them. The action is seen throughout in a sort of sad trance: Fuchs looks at the details, then changes focus so that the facts become figurative. He has a humane gift—not facile compassion but the ability to put the ephemeral into phrases that, paradoxically, fix their ephemerality. ("The stir of smoking mountain panoramas.")

And yet there is a suspicion, in the above and through the book, that he is trying to *write* himself out of superficiality and into depth; a belief that, by adding, he deepens; that by working up to easy magic words ("phantom life") he casts a retroactive glow of poetry. Some of the writing is beautiful, but the book's depth is questionable. The lovely phrases, the sharp percepts, as they occur, are almost like reminders to him and us that this is not just more Hollywood fiction, this is serious.

This weakness of fundamental ground comes largely, I think, from Fuchs's failure to characterize his two principals. They remain outlines, and the gravity of the work suffers. Burt Claris, the agent, is described but not realized. An ex-athlete, with a rich young wife but an empty marriage, a *Luftmensch* leg-man for a big agency—all the data are there for a latter-day Fitzgerald character. But Claris is muzzy and obscure: we feel little that he feels, we don't share his thinking as it is thought. There is a kind of fiction (the *New Yorker* has lots of it) in which data-recital is equated with creation. Claris suffers from that false equation; and suffers, too, from Fuchs's uncertainty about viewpoint. The angle of vision often shifts arbitrarily, as with equivocal film editing, and makes Claris more of an observer than an agonist.

The star, Adele Hogue, has a good deal more certification, but even she seems an amalgam of Fuchs's experiences, rather than a person. Hogue is much-married, very big box-office but slightly on the skids, and has walked off the set of an expensive production. She has fled to a desert hotel, where most of the action occurs, with her three children. Claris has been sent to bring her back because he gets on all right with her—in fact, sometimes sleeps with her. (Such are professional qualifications.) She explains, at one point, why she fled:

“If I could do the work, if I could get myself on the set, I wouldn't be here in the first place, did that ever occur to you?” she said, lashing at him. . . . “You have to go in like a bank robber.”

That last line, I would bet, is not invented. But Hogue's talk about her work and her beginnings and her marriages and affairs and nervous exhaustion, here and there suggesting Lana Turner and Ava Gardner and others, adds up to a blend rather than a human being. Some of her dialogue doesn't help. (“Everybody around here is so broad-beamed and phlegmatic. They lay there with their aplomb, getting their perfect, even suntans.”) Overall there's the sense that Fuchs is struggling to create a prototype. Hogue is always a symbol without becoming a woman.

With Claris and Hogue both dim, the book floats unsteadily, a conscious allegory, and the recurrent irony in fiction recurs again here: the minor characters are clearer than the principals—Fannie Case, the diamond-fingered woman who owns the hotel; Harry Case, her quasi-criminal husband who too has been a lover of Hogue's; Robert Wigler the producer who drifts through the story, resigned to doom.

The idea of the novel is that two lives, just beginning to decline, join together as they reach the beginning of the downgrade. Claris's marriage breaks up, and his agency fires him (because he has failed with Hogue). Hogue is running out of “bank-robber” guts, is showing the effect of the years of star-life demands. The two careers combine, as the waverings start, when she holds a press conference at the end to announce her engagement to Claris. (Incidentally, the book's jacket-copy flatly misstates the resolution.)

It's a story of attrition and calm, of professional ravage and the shaky, shaken calm behind it. As a fiction chronicle of the film world, it tells us little that we haven't learned from West and Fitzgerald or, on a lower level, from Budd Schulberg and Gavin Lambert. Its attempt to convert the studio whirl into the motions of the cosmos is far below that of the masterpiece in that genre, Isherwood's *Prater Violet*. After all its use in fiction, the studio has now become like the college campus, a setting more meaningful to those who spend their lives there than to others.

Yet Fuchs is sufficiently overwhelmed by what he has seen in the past thirty



years, the stench of power and murder is so strong in his nostrils, that he makes us pay heed. He has a comprehension of pain and some reticence about it, so we read his book as the often vivid manifest of the better book he did not write. For me, that was also true of the work he did on the other side of his Hollywood years.

***The Book of Daniel*, by E. L. Doctorow (*New Republic*, 5 June 1971)**

This is less a review than a celebration. In *The Book of Daniel* (Random House, 303 pp.), E. L. Doctorow has written the political novel of our age, the best American work of its kind that I know since Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*. Doctorow could hardly be less like Trilling in style or temper, but that's part of the point; it helps to make this novel the quintessence of the '60s, as Trilling, in 1947, fixed the political '30s.

The time of the book, the "present" time, is mostly 1967, between Memorial Day and Christmas. Daniel Lewin, twenty-seven, is a graduate student at Columbia, and this book is (and is not!) what he writes instead of a dissertation. He's the son of Communist parents, Bronx Jews, who were executed at Sing Sing in the early 1950s for conspiring to steal atomic secrets for Russia. He has a younger sister. The book is built on his attempts to find the truth about his parents, about himself in relation to them, and on his relations with his sister in her attempts to regain sanity.

The premise is only one of the potentially troublesome elements in the book that Doctorow converts into triumph. The Rosenberg parallel might have been a mere gimmick. (Trilling, triumphing likewise, based a major character on Whittaker Chambers.) There is no tricky plot. And most certainly it's not a forensic novel about whether the Rosenbergs were really innocent or really guilty. This is an artwork about the *idea* of the Rosenbergs and people like them, how they came into being in the U.S., why their trial was needed, what their legacy is, and the intertexture of that legacy with the social-political climate today. I haven't looked up the facts of the Rosenberg case; it would be offensive to the quality of this novel to check it against those facts. This is a work of historic and psychic currents.

The parents were named Isaacson. (Nothing has been chosen lightly in this book, including names. The first Isaac, we remember, was nearly sacrificed to his father's beliefs.) They were first-generation Americans, he a radio repairman with a tiny Bronx shop, she the daughter of a crazy old woman who wrote Bintel Briefs ("bundles of letters") to a Yiddish newspaper, recounting persecution in Russia and fierce struggle on the lower East Side.

After the Isaacsons' execution, their two children, fourteen and nine, were adopted by a Boston law professor and wife named Lewin. The book begins with a trip that Daniel and his young wife and baby make to Massachusetts, to join the Lewins in a visit to the mental hospital where his sister is confined. She was taken there after cutting her wrists in a Howard Johnson's ladies' room nearby. The book ends—one of the three endings that are proposed—with the sister's funeral. In between we are pressed to a kaleidoscopic vision of the present and the intermingled past, of political history as it applies to the Isaacsons, of the fires of this century as they burn to and through the borders of all our lives.

A second triumph of Doctorow's is the form of the book. Daniel, the "author," often says that he hates the idea of sequence. The temporal urge of this book is toward simultaneity, not only of time planes but of different viewpoints. Not only are the present and various pasts closely interwoven but also various views of Daniel himself,

who is seen in both the third and first persons—sometimes in successive sentences. As with many modern sensibilities, Doctorow has fractured seamless sequence because he felt, evidently, that the turbulence which bred and surrounds Daniel is always present with him, all of it, all the time. Doctorow's cascading form sweeps along with it occasional thematic variations, one of them a "True History of the Cold War" in the shape (says the author) of a raga.

Another important part of the method, throughout the book, is the consciousness that the book is being written. For instance: "I suppose you think I can't do the electrocution. I know there is a you . . . I will show you that I can do the electrocution." And then Doctorow-Daniel does it, unforgettably. This now-familiar consciousness of art in the making of art, this attempt to fix the act of creation as part of the finished work, can be both disarming and enriching, as it is here. "Nothing up my sleeve" adds to the magic, for the modern consciousness that is suspicious of magic. (In fact, I wish Doctorow had used this method in one "straight" section: the climactic meeting between Daniel and his parents' accuser, years after their death, in Disneyland at Christmas. The irony of the setting and season might have lost its slightly pat touch if Daniel had capitalized on the Disneyland aspects of the meeting.)

A third triumph is that this novel's untraditional form has not subverted traditional fiction values. Doctorow might have thrown all his creative energy into glittering sequences and—like some contemporary writers, including some good ones—might have asked the fulfillment of the design to *be* the work. But he achieves other ends as well.

*Character.* Every character in this book, major or minor, is sharply visible, has a voice—even a peripheral character like the Isaacsons' janitor, a black man whom these society-changing Communists, these Jews who have known persecution, are quite willing to relegate to a bare cot in the cellar; and who is symbolically waiting.

*Place.* Every setting, every occasion has an essence, an odor: a dusty radio-shop window of the '40s, a Yippie pad in the East Village (where, fifty years before, Daniel's grandmother had struggled!), a Paul Robeson concert in the late '40s, a Washington Peace March in 1967.

*Drama.* Every sequence is handled by a dramatist, is understood to its conclusion—just one example, the Dickensian episode in which the Isaacson children flee the children's shelter, while their parents are in jail awaiting trial.

And everything in this scintillating yet deeply mined book feeds its theme. Here is an approximation of that theme. Political radicalism was brought to the United States by late nineteenth-century immigrants, many of whom were East European Jews. Previous political impulses in America had usually been comfortably meliorist, often theologically based. With increasing socio-economic pressures, partly caused by those very immigrants, the European ideologies that the immigrants brought with them became more and more germane. Therefore it's idle to speak of those ideologies as European concepts imposed on America: those immigrants, and their progeny, now are part of America, and the very changes caused by their interfusion have placed their ideologies among the American antecedents and options. In its reaction against those ideologies, not an entirely deplorable reaction *in itself*, the U.S. has gone through several spasms of purge, cruelly antithetical to our constitutional premises. (One such spasm was precisely the Red spy hunt of the late '40s, when this country needed victims to console itself for the fact that Russia was getting the bomb.)

This novel, it must be said, faces up squarely and intelligently to the Jewishness of its subject. Jews had been persecuted, Jews are historically avid for

social justice, Jews had less at stake in Anglo-Saxon-cum-Yankee traditions and rewards. Jews were in big cities mainly, cities were trouble spots, Jews were troublemakers. Doctorow refuses to blink any of this. On the contrary, by plunging his hands into the nettles, he plucks out the flower. By confronting the matter in fullest human resonance, he transforms parochialism into universals. His Jews become prototypical.

Out of all this background, partially in reaction against it, come many of today's revolutionaries. (No longer so markedly Jewish, by any means.) Their anti-intellectualism has its roots in impatience with the Bach-and-Shakespeare radicals of the past. Pop culture and pot culture are a reproof of all that Parnassian pipe-smoking culture that, in their view, merely mirrored the oppressive society at a different angle. Socially and psychically, too, there have been both connection and change. Doctorow shows us how pervasively sexual the Isaacson marriage was. Daniel has inherited that sexuality, as he inherited radicalism, but has rejected his parents' "respectability," as he rejects formal ideology. A bizarre sex episode with his wife in a moving car is a declaration of continuity and independence.

And beneath the large theme that underlies the book is the even larger contemporary crisis in consciousness: the crisis of faith in rationalism, the faith so hard-won in the last few centuries, the resurgence of the Myth of Unreason because the Myth of Reason has not only failed so far to bring the promised grace but may have become a habit-forming narcotic. One need not subscribe to this belief, as for the most part I do not, to see its power in this novel. (Congruent belief is hardly necessary in art. I'm not a Catholic royalist, yet I think Evelyn Waugh's trilogy is the best fiction produced by World War II.)

"Existential" revolution, since 1967, has shown defects in dynamics, but Doctorow dramatizes the forces that produced it, along with the opposition to it—chiefly, the ingrained American hunger for innocence, a hunger that always gets vicious when frustrated. Fundamentally, the novel implies, the new revolution grew out of a break with a formal ideology that had its own innocence. Daniel's parents accepted the roles that society imposed on them in the prosecution; more, they accepted the roles that the Party imposed on them. (There is a masterly scene, imagined by Daniel, in which a mere exchange of glances reveals an intra-Party collusion.) The book chronicles a long break with acceptances, both conservative and radical. The end, the third and final ending, leaves the facts of the Isaacson case still mysterious for Daniel, but the forces that grew out of the radical past swerve until they reach the Columbia library—spring of 1968!—where he is writing.

E. L. Doctorow is forty, a former editor for book publishers, and the author of two previous novels that are not comparable with this work. His *Book of Daniel* is beautiful and harrowing, rhapsodic and exact. Like all good artists dealing with such subjects, Doctorow does not give answers but is not content only to pose questions. At one point Daniel says of his father: "He wrestled society for my soul." The line might be a motto for this fine book.

***Now Playing at Canterbury*, by Vance Bourjaily (*Saturday Review*, 18 September 1976)**

In this novel a professor of English, conducting a seminar on Fitzgerald, admonishes his students: "And remember, the form itself, the novel as an American expression shaped to the times, wasn't all laid out for him as it might be for one of

you. It still had to be developed.” One can easily argue with this proposition (Melville and Hawthorne and Mark Twain and Crane floundered for form? Were inexpressive of their times?), but it helps to explain Vance Bourjaily’s view of his own work. For thirty post-Fitzgerald years, Bourjaily has been publishing novels that have tried hard for contemporary expression and that have relied on the belief that Fitzgerald, along with Hemingway, laid out the forms—more specifically, the available styles.

For the past twelve of those thirty years, Bourjaily has been working on *Now Playing at Canterbury* (Dial Press, 518 pp.). One sees by the title that his model here is not American, and he underscores that fact by writing fourteen pages of the book in Chaucerian verse. Presumably he knows Nevill Coghill’s comment that the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* “is the concise portrait of an entire nation,” and Bourjaily has moved from that idea to make his group of tales a less concise portrait of a much larger nation. But even though the armature of the book derives from fourteenth-century England, the styles are still the styles of Bourjaily—the skimming of Fitzgerald, the long march with Hemingway.

His Canterbury is State University, in State City, in the Midwest. (Bourjaily has taught for many years at the University of Iowa.) Not all of the many characters who tell their tales in the course of the book are literal pilgrims to the place; some of them live and work there, but they are all brought together by one event—the first production of an opera written by two teachers at the university. Bourjaily tells us, in a prefatory note, that the opera really exists, although the composer in the novel is a fictitious character. He doesn’t bother to mention whether he himself was the author of the libretto, which is ascribed to the English professor in the novel itself. (The complete libretto crops up in the novel—a thin, ironic melodrama.) Besides the composer and librettist, the lighting designer and some of the singers are faculty members. Other singers are local people. To State City, for the occasion, come the principal singers, a famous young Japanese-American conductor, and the stage director.

As in *The Canterbury Tales*, the book deals predominantly with the past lives of its many characters. Relatively little of consequence happens in the present other than a surprising stand of honor by the seedy little vagabond of a stage director. Past lives are usually recounted in first-person narratives, again as in the *Tales*, and deal with a cross section of major moral-social evolutions in the last twenty years, with such salient sociopolitical issues as racism, Vietnam, and student radicalism. Taken together, these narratives, in their “present” context, are the purpose of the book—again as in the *Tales*: they are intended to provide an overview of and an insight into America weaving through the recent past into the future. (First line of the book: “Here we go.” Last line: “There we go.”) But the book falls into a familiar pitfall of American novelistic gigantism: Bourjaily thinks that by presenting a *lot* of experience, he is deepening our perception of it. I doubt that many readers will find their knowledge or understanding of contemporary matters much enlarged by winding along through the elaborate schema of this long novel.

Still, Bourjaily merits discussion if only because he is one of the last of a literary line. To examine his new book is to discern something of the changes in American writing in the last thirty years—a probably unwitting statement that he has made on his theme of “expression shaped to the times.” Bourjaily’s first novel, *The End of My Life*, published in 1947, deals mainly with an American who volunteered for the British ambulance corps during World War II and served in the Middle East. In the year of its appearance, it seemed to me a patent but moderately gifted attempt

to continue the literary service that Hemingway had done to World War I, and it was interesting for that very reason. Hemingway's terse style and "doomed" tone seemed fitting to a young author after a much different war: *The End of My Life* seemed to say something about and to the author's contemporaries, as if its mannerisms at least provided a way to deal with experience in a relatively barren time. Looking through the book again before reading this new one, I could see only the mannerisms, no residual pertinence. This wouldn't matter, obviously, except that the mannerisms persist in this new book. And even that wouldn't matter if those mannerisms seemed truly *his*, ingested and controlled, pliant and directly mediative.

But the genuinely shocking point is that, after all this time, after seven intervening books (including a novel longer than this new one), Bourjaily's style still seems merely imitative and therefore stagnant. There are patches of lyricism that seem to have filtered down through several carbon copies of Fitzgerald, such as his description of the conductor at the premiere: "He is . . . neither man nor musician but seventy-eight instruments. . . . His mouth is reeds and mouthpieces, his skin tympani, his bones cymbals, glocks, and triangles." Most of the dialogue is so slavishly Hemingway as almost to be parody—clenched-teeth, we-happy-few-who-understand-one-another stuff. (Plenty of examples, but to represent adequately one of those telegraph-message exchanges would take up too much space.) Bourjaily's one personal contribution to style, as in his first novel, is recurrent undergraduate facetiousness. A woman in bed asks her lover to pass the champagne, and he says, "It's flat, I'm afraid." She says, "Such a dear, skeptical Columbus, oh, I'm sure it's round." (Matters are worse when, from time to time, Bourjaily seems embarrassed by the feeble jokes and treats them as if they were the characters' and not his.)

Now this assortment of devices, besides the artistic inadequacy, has the added burden of seeming *passé*. I can't think of a serious novelist under fifty who suffers from these particular defects. It's not a question of fashion-mongering, of maintaining that Bourjaily would be better if his stylistic model were Pynchon or Percy, Barth or Barthelme. The issue is a style that began as overt imitation and has remained overt imitation through thirty years, and it's the overt imitativeness itself that dates it. The English professor in this novel fulminates against the word "generation" as not being a true critical term. Perhaps not, but it is a historical one; and when Bourjaily describes student radical protests and drug busts of the 1960s in a style that evolved in the 1920s and gives us only worn mimesis of that style, the effect is that of a middle-aged TV performer using rock jargon.

The dated quality is abetted by the loads of facts, of two kinds, that are dumped frequently on these pages. First, "manly" facts. For decades it was thought that details of occupation and milieu, hard and "real," would legitimate fiction in a country that had, or assumed it had, a pragmatic temperament. We had a range of "professional" novels about every kind of occupation from soldiering to literary agenting and beyond, and when they weren't loaded with details of a profession, they were loaded with details about guns or boats or bullfights or anything else that proved the author was not a mere writer. Bourjaily serves up a great deal about automobiles and tennis and the preparation of animal testicles as human food and much, much more.

The second kind of fact is interwoven. He splices in (as Hemingway did) culture material to show he's no mere brute: encyclopedia tours, for example, of Haydn, Adolphe Appia, operatic *castrati* (a quite different view of the testicle). These twofold displays of data, which lie on the book like undelivered freight, reflect kinds

of ambition and uneasiness that don't afflict writers any longer. They underscore the feeling that, despite its subject matter, this novel is at least twenty-five years old, that its author is a stubborn survivor.

I won't dwell on the tricks in the book. The Chaucer imitation is only one. There is much typographical horseplay. There are letters reproduced (supposedly) in the handwritings of the senders. There are many, many pages of comic-strip balloons in which the tale of the Japanese-American is given. (I assume that this device—meant to suggest *The Green Hornet*?—is to let a pop form comment sardonically on popular race prejudice.) The effect of all this razzmatazz is only to weaken characterizations that smell of glue anyway.

Still, in criticizing Bourjaily—or almost anyone else, for that matter—one must avoid the implication of reproof, as if he were just being naughty, as if he could see deeper and write better if only he would try. On the contrary, this new book shows again how hard he is trying. His trouble is not—certainly not—sloth or triviality of intent but simply an insufficient talent still mired in its first adorations. One chapter, called “Fitzgerald Attends My Fitzgerald Seminar,” epitomizes this book. It begins promisingly as the dead author, unseen by anyone but the teacher, enters and seats himself. But the idea is not used to any purpose; it's just a gimmick on which to hang commonplace material. The whole novel, under its Chaucerian blazon, suffers the same way as that chapter. The title and the idea are the best things about it.

***Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*, by Gregor von Rezzori (*New York Times*, 19 July 1981)**

The jacket of a rich, disquietingly good book titled *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* (Viking Press, 287 pp.) calls it “a novel in five stories.” Though these five long stories are independent, they are linked and dramatically cumulative. One can accept them as component parts of an organism, but there are reasons to examine the term “novel.”

Here are some facts about the author, Gregor von Rezzori. He was born in 1914 in the Bukovina, a region that once belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then was part of Rumania, and is now split between Rumania and the U.S.S.R. He studied at the University of Vienna and worked in Bucharest as an artist. He spent the war years in Germany. His first language is German, and he is at ease in several languages. (This book was first published in Germany, but two of the stories were originally composed in English. One of those two appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1969.) After World War II, von Rezzori did some film work: he has written for Volker Schlöndorff and has acted for Louis Malle, among others. At present he lives in Italy with his Italian wife.

Most of these facts are also true of the book's protagonist, or are transparently touched up, and all the other facts of the book fit between or around them logically. Four of the five pieces are in the first person, whose name is Gregor. But I don't suggest that *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* is simply autobiography costumed as a novel; nor is it a conventional autobiographical novel. It's a phenomenon more far-reaching and refined—a novel as autobiography. In the last story the narrator says that though he “could look reality in the face, better than most other people,” he had talents indispensable to survival. One of them is “the artful feat of always holding up a new possibility of himself, a fiction of himself.” This connotes a great difference both from the formal autobiographical novel and from sheer fabrication. It is literature in

which the author envisions himself as a character in a design arranged from the data of his life as another author might arrange items from fictitious notes.

Von Rezzori's delicate method suits the book's central truth, which is indicated in its title. This is the story of an upper-class middle-European—of Italian ancestry, with Austrian loyalties and Rumanian influences—immersed in environmental attitudes, educated to regard Jews as aliens, threats, subordinates, rivals, curs. The possible exceptions were Jewish women, who might be seen as sport. ("A Jewess is no Jew" was the common phrase.) Von Rezzori's book does not recant or justify those views: it is the straightforward yet imaginative, often discomfiting, always enthralling "novel" of a life in which such attitudes provide the chief dynamics.

Gregor's family, well off, lived in the Rumanian town that apparently was also the setting of von Rezzori's earlier novel *The Hussar*, published in the United States in 1960. His father's passion was hunting. (The hunter "fired his last shot into his temple when the Russians took the Bukovina in 1940.") The first story is called "Skushno," a Russian word that signifies "a spiritual void that sucks you in like a vague but intensely urgent longing." The thirteen-year-old Gregor, so afflicted with *skushno* that he does badly in school, spends the summer in a hamlet with an elderly aunt and uncle. There he becomes friends with a Jewish boy of his own age, the son of the local doctor, a boy bright and gifted but so free of *skushno*, evidently, and so abrasive that Gregor can't resist doing him a painful injury when the chance arises. As a result the boy's father refuses to treat Gregor in a small emergency, is expelled from the medical profession, and moves away. And Gregor's polarized life with Jews has begun.

It continues in "Youth," a story set in Bucharest in 1933, where Gregor, at nineteen, is working as a window dresser for a cosmetics firm. In this culturally mixed city, the firm is managed by Sudeten Germans and Transylvanian Saxons, the watchman is Bessarabian, a chief customer is Armenian. Another customer is a Jewish widow who begins an affair with Gregor that prospers for a time. The end of their affair, which is first breached by a slap he gives her in public, has a deeply buried resemblance, one feels, to the break with the doctor's son. Because she is Jewish, Gregor had to break with her eventually.

"Lowinger's Rooming House," which von Rezzori wrote in English, is also set in Bucharest, not long after. ("The Lowingers were Hungarian Jews who came from the region of Temeshvar, where Hungarian, Rumanian, Austrian, and Jewish culinary arts mingled in happy harmony.") Gregor becomes friendly with another boarder, Miss Alvaro, who was born Jewish but converted to Armenian Christianity for the sake of the uncle and aunt who reared her and are now dead. She asks Gregor to help her deal with the contents of her relatives' apartment. He does so and makes a discovery about her relatives that he thinks will bring her closer to him, but he is too late: another boarder has already shocked her sexually (as carnal game, "a Jewess is no Jew") and closeness with her is now out of the question for Gregor.

"Troth," also written in English, is set mostly in Vienna during the 1930s; there Gregor is desultorily studying architecture and carrying on at least two affairs. One, more companionable than fiery, is with a young Jewish woman, a sort of Viennese Sally Bowles, through whom Gregor meets the aged Karl Kraus and the young Herbert von Karajan. The other affair, more engrossing, is with a married woman. Gregor has a crucial rendezvous with her on the night of March 11, 1938. When he tries to go to her house, he finds the streets full of marching Nazis hailing

the *Anschluss*. In order to keep his assignation with his beloved, he joins the ranks of marchers until he reaches her address.

"Pravda," the last story and the only one written in the third person, is framed by a walk through Rome in 1979. Gregor is taking *marrons glacés* to the ninety-four-year-old great aunt of his "present, third, Italian wife." His first wife was an East Prussian, he tells us, his second a Jewish woman who was pregnant with his child. It was a boy, whom Gregor adored and who died when he was five. (Gregor would have been more comfortable with a girl, however, because a boy seemed "himself as a Jew.")

En route through Rome now, with the third person employed to permit longer perspectives, Gregor summons up and distills what has happened to him since Vienna, and gives us further insights into his earlier years. He was in Berlin during the war, but all he tells us about this period is that he was "a hideous fop . . . cynically watching a world in flames." This is one period, hardly trivial, about which von Rezzori's candor falters. (Perhaps it will be treated in his next novel, promised for 1982.) We do learn that he hated all the combatant nations and feels that the war "destroyed civilization" (he doesn't specify how an Allied defeat would have saved civilization), and he comments wryly on the "world revolution" that young people dream about and that the war made possible.

When Gregor arrives at the great aunt's house, the concierge tells him that the ancient woman has just died. Her last word was "Pravda." The concierge knows what the word means ("Truth"): Her husband is a Communist. Gregor gives her the *marrons glacés*.

Conceived as the representative imaginings of a life, these stories are schematic only in that von Rezzori believes in destiny through conditioning. They are wonderfully intricate in character and texture, studded with observation, both factual and opinionated (e.g., the look of "a typical immigrants' flat"; an "Armenian preference for pink"). Joachim Neugroschel's translations of three of the stories have a few bumps, but are mostly fluent, even resplendent. If Neugroschel can write "melted water" when he means "melted snow," he can also write:

. . . the turquoise sky was taking a step into the universe and igniting at its edges. At Mr. Garabetian's side, I would sip mocha; the coffee grounds in the tiny cups curdled into Japanese ink-brush drawings, while the two of us waited to catch the twinkle of the first star.

The match between Neugroschel's three translations and von Rezzori's two stories written in English is seamless, with perhaps more credit to von Rezzori, who can write: "The morbid rhythmic stamping of their feet hung like a gigantic swinging cord in the silence that had fallen on Vienna."

It is irrelevant—his title tells you so from the start—to draw up a ledger of the good and bad things that von Rezzori says about Jews and see how he comes out. (For instance, Gregor speaks Yiddish and knows more about some aspects of Jewishness than many of the Jews he meets; but this is offered only as a paradox.) It is as irrelevant to argue with von Rezzori's values as with Louis-Ferdinand Céline's or Knut Hamsun's. He is not of their stature, but he is an artist, devilishly honest, stubborn, the creator and the created of an artwork about a survivor. It is through von Rezzori's art, rather than through any vanity or apology of Gregor's, that we are enlightened. Most of the millions who share von Rezzori's views don't have even the



ability to face them as he does, let alone the gifts to reveal them with such disturbing, defiant clarity.

#### **Books (Film/Culture & the Arts)**

***Film: An Anthology*, edited by Daniel Talbot (*New Republic*, 19 October 1959)**

On the debit side of film's contributions to culture must be listed most of the

literature on the subject. No other art in history has evoked as much or as boring a body of comment in as short a time. Why is this so?

The rise of film coincided with the advent of Freud, with several social revolutions, with one great political revolution, and with a tremendous rise in popular education. All these produced an army of relatively unemployed commentators, anxious to apply new sciences and values to the new art. From the viewpoint of a judicious literature, the film couldn't have been invented at a worse time. A hundred years earlier there would have been fewer migrant intellectuals looking for unexplored territories to stake out; a hundred years hence we may wear our learning more lightly.

There is no reason why the general reader should have bothered with most of the flatulent, self-advancing nonsense written about films. Thus it is pleasant to report that Daniel Talbot's *Film: An Anthology* (Simon & Schuster, 649 pp.) contains a number of selections worth anybody's time. It also contains a number of primer pieces and some examples of the worst pedantic sludge and critical ecstasy; and so it can be said to be a fair cross-section of what has been written about the movies.

In the first part, "Aesthetics, Social Commentary, and Analysis," there are some pairings that make the contrasts vivid. The book opens with the windy "Art of Cineplastics" by Elie Faure, a wearisome example of a professional aesthete kicking his leaden heels in pastures new; this is followed by Erwin Panofsky's thoughtful, reasoned, and humorous "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures." Allardyce Nicoll's barren comments are compensated for by James Agee's familiar but still rewarding essay on silent comedy. Arnold Hauser's ploddings are balanced by the brilliance of Robert Warshow in an excellent (if not the only tolerable) sociological interpretation of the Western. One of Manny Farber's effusions precedes a sound essay by Pauline Kael, which, in fact, answers Farber on some points. The excerpt from the Wolfenstein-Leites *Movies: A Psychological Study* is an epitome of the new scientific mind at its deadliest: the Ph.D.s Who Got There First.

The section on "Theory and Technique," which might have been the strongest in the book, is the weakest. There are the predictable excerpts from Pudovkin and Eisenstein and Rotha, an elementary piece by René Clair, and a stimulating interview (as one would expect) with Jean Cocteau. But a piece of Arnheim's cluttered book clutters this one; and two film techniques go unrecognized by Talbot. There is no word by an actor. Why not "Acting and Behaving" by Alexander Knox or "I Am Not a Camera," by Michael Redgrave? Or some of Nikolai Cherkassov's *Notes of a Soviet Actor*? There is no word on music. Why not an excerpt from Hanns Eisler's *Composing for the Films*?

The third section, "History and Personal," contains among other selections Terry Ramsaye's prosy account of the early Edison days, the fascinating section on Griffith from Lewis Jacobs' important film history, one of the more lucid chapters of Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, a splash from the acid bath that Lillian Ross gave John Huston, and an insider's view of Hollywood by Ben Hecht. Flagrantly absent is a chronicle of Italian films since the war. Flagrantly present are pieces by Robert Payne and Henry Miller on Chaplin and Luis Buñuel, respectively. These ostensibly critical appreciations are simply dithyrambs, emotional floods brought about by exposure to artistic experience and carried on, quite egocentrically, in the vein of Romain Rolland's *Beethoven the Creator*.

Two further strictures must be brought against Talbot. He has included some

articles that contain errors and dated material. One howler, in the John Grierson piece, he corrects in a footnote, but he prints the extensive section based on the mistake. Why wasn't this foolishness excised? Why preserve Seymour Stern's absolute certainty, in 1936, that *It Happened One Night* would be forgotten in five years? Why reprint a chapter of Leo Rosten's *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* that contains eighteen-year-old statistics and anachronistic conclusions?

Secondly, the bibliography, even for a short list, is inadequate. Two instances: it fails to mention those highly valuable books *The Liveliest Art*, by Arthur Knight, and *The Film and the Public*, by Roger Manvell. (Manvell, who has probably done more as film essayist and historian than any other writer in English, is mentioned only as the editor of one book. There is no essay by him in the collection.) The list of magazines, although it specifies some that are long defunct, omits *The Spectator*, which, in Isabel Quigly, has one of the best film critics now writing.

There will be little for the specialist in this anthology, but for the general reader who wants a one-volume library on the subject, it is useful.

***Shaw in His Time*, by Ivor Brown (*New York Times*, 10 April 1966); *The Serpent's Eye: Shaw and the Cinema*, by Donald P. Costello (*New York Times*, 10 April 1966); & *Bernard Shaw on Cinema*, edited by Bernard F. Dukore (*New Republic*, 16 March 1998)**

Ivor Brown, who was the drama critic of *The London Observer* from 1928 to 1954, has published numerous books, including *Shakespeare in His Time* and *Dickens in His Time*. I have not read these last, but his new volume, *Shaw in His Time* (Thomas Nelson, 212 pp.), does not urge me to make up the lapse.

The plan here is good: to "place" the author in relation to the social, political, and intellectual history of his period. But the execution is bland and superficial, sometimes erroneous in detail, and sometimes distorted in larger matters. The book is like an elongated lecture for an afternoon of ladies who want cozy bite-sized discourse and accessible donnish jokes. After all, how seriously can one take an author who calls Shaw "the laughing cavalier of Socialism"?

Samples of the book's small errors: the name of Samuel Phelps, the nineteenth-century actor-manager, is given in two versions, once correctly. Brown says that Ellen Terry never played Lady Cicely Waynflete in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, then later, in a chronological summary of Shaw's career, he says, correctly, that she did play in it; both times he misspells Lady Cicely's name. He gives incorrectly the title of *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. He says that Shaw could be spellbound by actresses but not by actors, which contradicts what Shaw himself wrote about, for instance, Barry Sullivan, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, and Granville-Barker. Other errors, added to the above, suggest that Brown is the laughing cavalier of accuracy.

But his misleading comments on Shaw's central ideas are more serious. For example, Brown refers to "autocracy, which [Shaw] believed to be preferable to democracy." This is a distortion of the author who wrote approvingly that "democracy means the organization of society for the benefit and at the expense of everybody indiscriminately and not for the benefit of a privileged class." Any reader of *Everybody's Political What's What* (1941), from which that quotation comes, will know that Shaw's strictures on democracy are all aimed toward refinement of its processes, not at abolition of the principle.

For another example, Brown says that, in the preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma*, Shaw "had written off modern medicine as a pretentious and pestilent fraud." This, again, is distorted. Shaw says there that "the medical profession, like the other professions, consists of a small percentage of highly gifted persons at one end, and a small percentage of altogether disastrous duffers at the other. Between these extremes comes the main body of doctors . . . who can be trusted to work under regulations with more or less aid from above according to the gravity of the case. What he inveighs against are the deification of the profession and the idea of giving doctors a financial interest in illness.

More instances could be added. Let it suffice that Brown's comments are twisted gossamer compared to the best analyses of the subject that have been published—those in Eric Bentley's *Bernard Shaw*.

For its part, Donald P. Costello's *The Serpent's Eye*, which is subtitled *Shaw and the Cinema* (University of Notre Dame Press, 209 pp.), is one more sub-dissection of the Shaw corpus. Ahead of us doubtless lie *Shaw and the Radio*, *Shaw and the Phonograph Record*, *Shaw and the Press Conference*, etc., etc.

Costello's book has the flavor of an expanded doctoral thesis. To wit: "Of the 1,143 lines of dialogue in the printed movie version of this scene, only 210 lines, many of them changed in sequence, are heard in the actual film." There is some heavy documentation of the obvious: "In a study of 'Psychology of Film Experience,' Hugo Mauerhofer reports that psychological investigation proves what experience shows, that 'static scenes which are acceptable to members of book and theater audiences are found excessively dull by those same individuals when they are an audience at the cinema.'" Despite the author's finickiness, there are some misspellings (Kracauer, Pudovkin, Apollodorus, Adolphe Menjou) and at least one flagrantly questionable statement. Costello says that the film adaptations of *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *The Millionairess* were "successful." Financially? This is news. Artistically? This, to me, is even bigger news.

The author shows—in percentage statistics—that Shaw's control of the films of his plays was in inverse ratio to their artistic success and also that Shaw's dogmatism with filmmakers was often ill-founded. Shaw's defense of his theory of film form as merely a filmed play was surely too severe, yet what do we remember of the best Shaw films? Is it the cinematic effects, as such, or is it the actors—Leslie Howard, Wendy Hiller, Rex Harrison, and Claude Rains, among others—speaking those brilliant lines? As for his own understanding of film art, Costello reveals a thorough knowledge of commonplaces, which he relieves occasionally with lists of names of authorities.

Still, the book is useful because it assembles in one place many of Shaw's remarks on film, much of his writing on the cinema, and all of his experience with the medium. Some of the incidental information is interesting: e.g., before the Howard-Asquith *Pygmalion* there had been a German and a Dutch version; Rex Harrison was summoned to play Cusins in the film of *Major Barbara* (thank heaven) only because another actor had been drafted into the military. The appendices contain some film scenes by Shaw that were unused and have not been previously published.

Thus, although it is impoverished in insight and its prose breathes hard, *The Serpent's Eye: Shaw and the Cinema* performs some clerical service.

Bernard F. Dukore is a preeminent Shaw scholar who has contributed greatly to the (still-continuing) taxonomy—or sub-dissection, as I referred to it in 1966—of

Shaw's career. There is so much material on so many subjects that various editors have by now arranged in books—Shaw on religion, Shaw on doctors, Shaw on Ireland, etc., etc.—that one might think the field exhausted. Wrong. (We can almost hear Shaw chuckling as he says it.) Dukore's major editorial work so far is his four-volume edition of Shaw's theater criticism, which may be briefly described as a blessing. But Dukore has also done a lot of work on Shaw's writings for and about film, and this goes on.

In 1968, Dukore prepared an edition of the screenplay of *Saint Joan* that Shaw wrote in 1934-36. (He tells us that Otto Preminger didn't even know of the existence of this screenplay when he directed his 1957 film, also called *Saint Joan*, from Graham Greene's flaccid version.) Subsequently Dukore edited *The Collected Screenplays of Bernard Shaw*; and two years ago he edited the correspondence of Shaw and Gabriel Pascal, the entrepreneur who produced three films of Shaw plays. (This book was in the University of Toronto Press's series of volumes of Shaw correspondence, done by topic.)

Now Dukore presents *Bernard Shaw on Cinema* (Southern Illinois University Press, 187 pp.)—a superior expansion of Donald P. Costello's *The Serpent's Eye* from over thirty years ago. Here are 107 articles, interviews, and letters to the press that are concerned with film. The order is chronological, 1908 to the year of Shaw's death, 1950. Through the book we can glimpse the arrival of film in the world, particularly from a playwright's point of view, and how it became established as an immense factor in a playwright's thinking.

Shaw's besetting sin, and virtue, is apparent from the beginning of the book: nothing ever happened in the world that he somehow hadn't expected and couldn't explain. With our superior hindsight we can see how slow he was to recognize that there is a distinct art of film, but his belief that, from the start, he knew more about filmmaking than most filmmakers was, and to some extent remained, justified. What he quickly perceived and argued on all his life was the special problem of censorship that film entailed.

It's well known that Shaw was a fanatic about photography. (The papers that he bequeathed to the London School of Economics include at least 10,000 of his photographs. That is not a misprint.) What Dukore clarifies is the surprising extent to which Shaw was involved with film. In 1946 he was asked, "If you had your time over again, would you write for the screen rather than the stage?" The answer was simple: "Yes." (In 1908 Tolstoy made a comparable comment *vis-à-vis* his plays.) As it was, in addition to earlier screen adaptations of his work, from 1937 to 1945 Shaw wrote only one new play, *In Good King Charles's Golden Days*, which he intended as a film; the rest of that time he spent on screenplays, including *Pygmalion*, which won an Oscar.

The extent of Shaw's film curiosities, animosities, and admirations is well displayed in this collection. (I wonder why Dukore omitted the prologue to the *Major Barbara* film that Shaw did for America. Dukore includes the prologue to *Pygmalion*.) There's one pleasantly surprising conversation, with the actor Adolphe Menjou in 1928, about the advent of sound—which Shaw had predicted twenty years before. Presumably he knew Menjou through the latter's appearance in Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*.

Shaw's enthusiasm for Chaplin winds through the book like a bright ribbon. (In Volume Two of the *Collected Letters* is one that he wrote to Thomas Hardy's widow after Hardy's funeral: "If only you knew how I wanted at the end to swoop on

you; tear off all that villainous crepe . . . make you come off, with him, to see a Charlie Chaplin film!") On the cover and the title page of Dukore's book is a photograph taken on Shaw's California visit in 1933, at a luncheon given for him by Marion Davies. On his left are his hostess, Louis B. Mayer, and Clark Gable. On his right is Chaplin.

***Losey on Losey*, edited by Tom Milne; *Luchino Visconti*, by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith; & *Jean-Luc Godard*, by Richard Roud (*New Republic*, 24 February 1968)**

The dam has burst. For years, new books about film have merely trickled out from U.S. publishers, in numbers quite inconsistent with the flooding interest in films. (Unlike France, which has been awash with film books for decades.) Now, at last, news of this interest has reached publishers. More film books have been published so far this season than in any season I can remember, and there are at least a dozen more to come this spring. A new series called Cinema World has just been launched jointly by an American and a British publisher; but unfortunately the first three volumes, which have appeared simultaneously, get the series off to a flying thud. These brief monographs are well produced, with plenty of photographs, and—sensibly—they have been published in both hardbound and paperback editions, which means one edition for library or gift use and one for their real public: present and recent college students. Other than that, there is not much in these books to praise.

The best of the three is *Losey on Losey* (Doubleday, 192 pp.). This is an interview with that director conducted by Tom Milne, co-editor of the series and a member of the British Film Institute (which is associated with the whole enterprise). Milne's book is the best of the lot simply because it is the one in which the "author" writes the least. Most of the time Losey is allowed to speak, as in the much longer interview by Truffaut of Hitchcock that was recently published. Although there is much meandering, Losey tells us about some problems he faced in making his films and some solutions, and gives us some useful observations. (For instance, what he learned about the use of sound while making the opening of *Accident*.) But even this book is marred by the pomposities of the interviewer in his introduction and his questions. Milne's very first line: "To each his own Losey." Just as, presumably, to each his own Blake and Mozart.

A bit further on, Milne writes:

Losey was going through a process of evolution, adapting his style to a new, more probing, much warier realization of the complexity of people and problems. . . . The process was not helped by the fact that, right up to *Eve*, Losey was forced to work on subjects not of his choice.

The ludicrousness apparently escapes Milne. Imagine writing of any other kind of artist-poet or novelist—that he was "going through a process of evolution" but that "the process was not helped" because he "was forced to work on subjects not of his choice." The dreadful conditions of most film directors' careers are not to be obscured by such verbal fur as "the process was not helped." The hard fact is that most directors are (possibly) talented hirelings, that—talented or not—they usually feel lucky to be working at all, and that, if they *are* talented, they spend their lives doing the best they can in different sizes of straitjackets. Even in straitjackets, they soon show signs of whatever talent and personality they have; but to talk like Milne, as if

the straitjacket were a minor annoyance, is to emit one kind of prevalent critical gush—an attempt to push filmmaking into an equivalent position with the completely personal arts, which, in the majority of cases, it is not. Losey knows better than his interviewer. Compare his generally hardheaded replies with the gaseous quality of many of Milne's questions.

*Luchino Visconti* (Doubleday, 192 pp.), by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, is of some value principally because it contains detailed synopses of Visconti's films. Nowell-Smith's comments are very much in the vein of literary criticism, which is curious considering his support of the *auteur* theory, in which the director is central. Despite this view, he blames Cesare Zavattini the screenwriter—three times—for shortcomings in *Bellissima*. Where was the *auteur*? In fact, Nowell-Smith's extensive commentary on each Visconti film scants its intrinsic cinematic qualities. For example, he gives about ten pages to character-and-milieu analysis of *Senso*, in orthodox literary manner, and about a page and a half to what he calls "the technical side," the cinematic elements. I don't necessarily object to this proportion, but I think it noteworthy in a critic who leans to the *auteur* theory.

Some of his attempts to grope toward a film aesthetics show glimmers of cohesion and relevance. But he gives all of four lines to Visconti's very extensive theater work (in Europe his theater and opera direction are as well-known as his films); and Nowell-Smith makes no connection between this experience and Visconti's ability to get credible performances from the fisher-folk in *La Terra Trema*. (Another leading neorealist, De Sica, also got good results with non-actors precisely because of his experience with actors.) And if Milne opens his book with empty pomp, Nowell-Smith closes with it:

Above all, [Visconti's] films are works of art. They reveal the world in a particular guise: not, perhaps, how it *is* in an objective sense; nor, for that matter, necessarily how we would like it to be; but how it can be perceived and experienced by a particular individual at a particular time.

Thank you, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. At last we know what a work of art is.

The worst of these three books is, predictably, Richard Roud's *Jean-Luc Godard* (Doubleday, 173 pp.). If the *auteur* theory allows us to predict something of a film's quality through knowledge of the director's work, that theory can also be applied to writing *auteurs* and to books. Roud is program director for the New York and London Film Festivals, and his comments in the New York program booklets prepared me for this opus.

To begin with, he is factually sloppy. He says: "No one in Godard's films has a flat, a home. Or if they do [*sic*], they have either just moved in or are just about to move out." This is untrue of *A Married Woman*. Further, Roud is intellectually pretentious in a way that would be irritating if it were not funny. Early in the book, on pages eight and nine, he splashes in the names of Hegel, Vico, Joyce, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Marx, and Wittgenstein like credentials. Perhaps he caught this pretentiousness from Godard himself. In *French Cinema* Roy Armes notes the "torrent of cultural allusions" in Godard's films, then says:

But these references are not developed and never become more than name-dropping in the tradition of that type of French film criticism which finds it impossible to review a gangster film without reference to Hegel or Kant. . . .

One can readily believe Truffaut's account of Godard's reading habits: "What struck me most about Godard at that time was his way of absorbing books. If we were with friends he would open, in the course of the evening, at least forty books and he always looked at the first page and the last.

Roud then proceeds to weight his essay with a series of profundities of which this is a fair sample: "A preoccupation with formal values or personal themes need not stop a man from being either a humanist or a moralist, or prevent him from tackling political themes." What college teacher would not slate a sophomore for these false antitheses in a thundering truism? Perhaps this knack for high-sounding emptiness is something else that Roud learned from Godard, whose pronouncements are quoted liberally. One of the latter: "Unlike painting and literature, the cinema both gives to life and takes from it, and I try to render this concept in my films." If that means anything, which I doubt, I suppose it has to do with the almost competitive reality of people, places and objects in films, and it applies to every film ever made, *The Sound of Music* as well as *Alphaville*.

In what is presumably the fundamental intent of this book, critical analysis, Roud is so splattery and scatterbrained that his criticism dissolves as one examines it. The basis of his approach is Hegelian dialectic in a debased and facile reduction, and he uses it in a way that fails to particularize Godard from among other directors. Then, when he gets to the matter of formal analysis, he writes: "I would like now to examine pure form in Godard—with the proviso that its purity is conditioned by its impure interaction with the other elements of his work." My idea of vengeance on an enemy would be to force him to make sense of that sentence. Roud then gives us, after some unintentionally hilarious statistical analysis of the opening of *Vivre sa Vie*, a description of the way Godard handles the camera in a later scene:

It is, in fact, a carefully worked out choreography for the camera, but one that is almost certainly abstract in its effect: that is to say, it does not correspond to any dramatic or expressive necessity. This, to my mind, is no condemnation, though it will be for some. But Godard's subject matter, his content, is strong enough, shall we say, to support any amount of abstraction he cares to impose on it.

The only thing that saves such criticism and writing from contempt is that they are beneath it. After all his "examination," our sage can do no better than to tell us that the passage is "almost certainly" abstract; and he defines abstraction as lack of correspondence with dramatic or expressive necessity. Thus we learn that abstraction is never dramatic or expressive! Yet Godard's subject matter (or, if you don't understand that term, his content) is so strong, "shall we say," that it can support *any amount* of non-dramatic or non-expressive material!

Readers may remember that I am not among Godard's fervent admirers, that I take most of his work with a grain of *saltimbanque*. Yet, lodged among the incessant effusions of his camera, there are, so far, two films I think fine—*Breathless* and *A Married Woman*—and no one could possibly deny his huge influence on young filmmakers. In any event, he deserves a more intelligent, perceptive, and literate exegete than Mr. Roud.

Three more books in this series will be published later this year. Let us, despite all indications, hope.



### Film Scripts (*New Republic*, 28 June 1969)

An important development in film-book publishing has gone largely unnoticed. More and more film scripts are being put into print and, when the films are foreign (as they mostly are), the translations are usually new. Probably the first major step in the last decade was taken by Simon & Schuster with *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman* (1960), followed by Orion Press with *Screenplays of Michelangelo Antonioni* (1963). Both publishers have since pressed on and have been joined by others.

In 1967 Orion published Bergman's *Film Trilogy* (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*). In 1968 Orion published two more volumes, *Miracle in Milan* by De Sica and (together) *The Blood of a Poet* and *The Testament of Orpheus*, by Cocteau.

All the above were hardbound books and almost all are now available in paper. All were illustrated with photographs, and almost all had some introductory matter. In 1968 Simon & Schuster launched a double paperbound series, *Classic Film Scripts* and *Modern Film Scripts*. (Apparently *Classic* and *Modern* mean pre- and post-World War II.) The former include *Battleship Potemkin*, *Grand Illusion*, *The Blue Angel*, *M*, *Children of Paradise*, and (together) *L'Âge d'Or* and *Un Chien Andalou*. The latter include *Jules and Jim*, *Alphaville*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Ikiru*, and *The Third Man*, with *The Bicycle Thief* coming shortly. The price is \$1.95 (except *Children of Paradise*, longer, at \$2.95), and they are sewn books—not merely glued together in so-called “perfect binding”—which is a considerable factor when buying paperbacks for long-term use. Many of them contain a little introductory material, and all of them have clumps of photographs.

Incomparably the best film-script series has been started by Grove Press under the general editorship of Robert Hughes, himself a filmmaker. (Grove has done scripts before, but this is a new series.) Three titles have appeared so far, *L'Avventura*, *Masculine Feminine*, and *The 400 Blows*, with *Rashomon* on the way. They are paperbound at \$1.95—not sewn, which is a pity—and are profusely illustrated with photographs inset at the appropriate places in the text. And nearly all the pictures are enlargements of frames in the film itself, not stills taken by a photographer on the set. (Stills are like paraphrases of an original statement.)

Spot checks of the texts show them to be in fluent English. (The Grove *L'Avventura* is much better translated than the Orion.) Each of the films is given in a kind of shooting-script form; the reader can treat it simply as reading material, the student can see the general camera plan of each shot and can see how long each shot runs. Omitted and variant scenes are appended in two of the books. When the films are based on stories—like *Masculine Feminine* and *Rashomon*—the original stories are included. (*Rashomon* also includes a bit of the script of *The Outrage*, the American remake.) Finally, there is a considerable amount of supplementary material in each book, such as interviews and reviews, most of which is not easily available elsewhere.

I have some small reservations about these Grove editions. I don't see the reason for including trivial newspaper reviews in the Godard and Antonioni. These reviews reflect popular attitudes at the moment of the picture's appearance, but that, although interesting in itself, is a quite different critical subject from the intrinsic study of a work. Further, the omission of those ephemera would have left room for

detailed filmographies. Nevertheless, these Grove books are the products of intelligence, knowledge, and care.

After a long drought, in which very few scripts were available in English, all the books above are a welcome freshet. Now how about some American films . . .

***The Movies as Medium*, edited by Lewis Jacobs (*New Republic*, 15 August 1970)**

Lewis Jacobs, author of *The Rise of the American Film*, has produced a much-needed anthology in *The Movies as Medium* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 335 pp.). There have been innumerable anthologies of film criticism and history and aesthetic theory—Jacobs himself has edited two of them—but there have been few completely devoted to “the fundamental resources and processes of film expression,” intended “to provide a storehouse of ideas about film technique and form which can furnish a framework for evaluating what one receives from different kinds of film” and, on this basis, to stimulate critical thought. In short, a conspectus of knowledge as an aid to the formation of individual taste. The only two previous books of this kind that I know are both British: *Footnotes to the Film*, edited by Charles Davy (1937), and *Working for the Films*, edited by Oswald Blakeston (1947). The former still has value but is dated; the latter is a sketchy handbook.

Jacobs includes judgmental material, but his emphasis is on information—in non-technical language for the general reader. His five main sections are Image, Movement (mostly of the camera), Time and Space, Color, and Sound, each section with an introductory article by Jacobs (himself a filmmaker). The book begins with a garland of short statements by directors, and it closes, in summation, with a section called The Plastic Structure.

Like every critic of every anthology ever published, I would have omitted some pieces and included others. But there is only one selection that I vigorously object to: Nicola Chiaromonte’s “On Image and Word,” which I have disliked since it was first published in *Encounter* in 1963. This is a dogmatic essay, superficially semiological, dismissive when it is not patronizing, which decrees that words are symbols but that photographs can only be signs. Therefore the film form cannot deal with serious or resonant matters, and nothing proves this better than films that attempt to do so. (Chiaromonte never mentions painting, and never engages the complex question of whether the images in painting are or are not as limited as photographs.) The essay is a sour gripe by a literary man who seems more frightened than convinced, and, even as a polemic stimulant in a book such as this, it is weak.

Some highlights among the twenty-seven pieces: Gregg Toland’s “Composition of the Moving Image,” particularly interesting since it comes from the master cinematographer who did *Citizen Kane*; “Coming to Terms with Color,” by William Johnson, which, since it appeared in *Film Quarterly* four years ago, has seemed to me the very best statement on its subject; and Jonas Mekas’s “The Other Direction,” remarks on the avant-garde film in which Mekas is as fervent as ever and more lucid than usual.

A helpful book, with good illustrations.

***On the Future of Art*, by Arnold J. Toynbee et al. (*New Republic*, 21 November 1970)**

In one way, at least, the theater has been in the van of Western culture: it was

the first art to become a Fabulous Invalid. But this new book, *On the Future of Art* (Viking, 134 pp.), is only the latest evidence that the theater long ago stopped being unique. These essays, which were originally lectures delivered last year at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, deal mainly with the possible future of painting and sculpture, but they touch on the subject of the survival of art in general.

In a brief introduction Edward F. Fry, associate curator of the museum, says that the participants were drawn from widely varying fields “because the nature of the problem demanded fresh insights beyond the normal limits of critical and art-historical discourse.” An interesting theory on paper. In practice, not very satisfactory. Out of seven essays on a matter of prime importance to civilization comes very little new light.

Some of the writers don’t even address the problem. Arnold Toynbee, after meandering pleasantly through history for a bit, advises people who are forced to be specialists these days to take advantage of the leisure provided by automation to become generalists. Louis I. Kahn, the eminent architect, gives us reflections on Silence and Light—deeply felt but irrelevant to the theme.

With Annette Michelson, we come to a different puzzle. Michelson, an art and film critic, devotes over half of her essay to an admiring and lucid exegesis of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist theory. (“It is . . . the business of structuralist analysis to reveal the extraordinary propensity of the human mind to organize, through symbolic sign systems, its experience of the world.”) Then she quotes two passages from *The Savage Mind* in which Lévi-Strauss rejects non-figurative painting and impressionism and which passages, she says, shock her. Soon after, Michelson says that the linguistic model is inapplicable to modern art and that the “radically rational stance of structuralism inhibits understanding of the art of our day.” But then why did she choose to write at length about structuralism? The first half of her essay leads us to expect an assertion that structuralism may be one answer to the problem of art’s future; then she ends with a palinode in which she says that structuralism is not only no use, but an impediment. She arbitrarily raises an argument only so that she can demolish it.

This is especially odd since structuralism contravenes Michelson’s most stimulating point. She notes the structuralist (Kantian) assumption of the difference between experience and reason: the principle that “only the radical discontinuity between the reality of lived experience and the real as knowable” can give us precision and objectivity. She argues against this principle in art:

The work of art, however, is that sort of object which is never simply understandable as object . . . Our perception of the work of art informs us of the nature of consciousness itself. This is what we mean when we say—as I do say—that, although art no longer means or refers, it does have a deeply cognitive function.

This belief, applied here specifically to non-figurative painting and sculpture, also applies, I would say, to much figurative and apparently designed work in other arts. For at least a century, poets have been telling us that a poem is not an object conceived and then written, that they put down words in order to find out what the poem is. In *The Seamless Web*, Stanley Burnshaw explores the complete continuum of *all* life processes in the creation and understanding of poetry. Lévi-Strauss, however, believes in discontinuity between reason and experience. Why, then, does

Michelson spend most of her essay on a man to whom (she says) her beliefs are “suspect”?

The barren contribution of B. F. Skinner, the behavioral psychologist, rebuts Fry’s hope that “fresh insights” could be found outside the usual sources. Skinner anticipates the charge of philistinism but does not escape it. Herbert Marcuse, for his part, is much more pertinent but quite predictable. “Art as a Form of Reality” (his title) means “not the beautification of the given, but the construction of an entirely different and opposed reality.” That other reality would cancel art’s present “spurious integration with the Establishment, its harmonization and sublimation of repressive conditions.” No surprises there. What are less predictable are Marcuse’s contradictions. Speaking of Goya’s anti-war paintings, he says that their very beauty anesthetizes the effect they should have: “fury gives way to the aesthetic experience.” Next he praises Schönberg, Berg, Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett as artists of new form who negate a harmful reality. But can one clearly distinguish the aesthetic experience of these artists from that of Goya? Does Goya *reconcile* one to the reality that Marcuse dislikes?

Then, after talking of opposites (in his view), Marcuse covers his bets by rolling an argument right down the middle. Presumably he doesn’t want to seem unresponsive to our artistic inheritance, so he adds that, even in the most traditional art, there is “some element of rebellion that is still ‘valid.’” Thus he is saved from legislating against Beethoven and Mahler; in fact, they will really be certified when social realities are changed. (For comment on Marcuse’s views, as part of a searching critique of all his views, I recommend Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Herbert Marcuse*, recently published by Viking.)

Two sculptors, James Seawright and J. W. Burnham, present ideas allied with Michelson’s and familiar to readers of such journals as *Artforum*. Says Seawright:

The more I work, the more I believe that the best ideas grow out of an understanding of the processes being used, rather than out of a preconceived notion of the effects to be achieved.

His work with “technologically related processes” connects with Burnham’s, whose interests center on “computer environments.” Says Burnham:

The traditional notion of consecrated art objects and setting will gradually give way to the conclusion that art is *conceptual focus*. . . . The breakdown and confusion between canonical art forms will continue until it is agreed that they place a false emphasis on physical and sensual isolation as prerequisites for aesthetic violation.

The last two words are the stumbling block here. How does one evaluate aesthetically the performance of a mechanism set in operation by the random movements of a visitor? (Burnham evaluates one by Seawright, nevertheless.) As other instances of different “conceptual focus,” Burnham also cites a wheat field mowed by Dennis Oppenheim and *Duration Piece #9*, by Douglas Huebler. “The mailing of a box to six locations across the country and the return of registered-mail receipts defined a straightline trajectory of art work across the United States . . . . Artistic volition is the only factor that separates it [mailing and mowing] from millions of similar acts.” How can aesthetic valuation be applied to such volition?

In fact, it is the persistent hunger for aesthetic valuation that puzzles me most in these new “sculptural” phenomena and other comparable work. Valéry said decades ago that there would be great innovations in art techniques, “perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.” Burnham talks now of conceptual focus, but the new focus longs to be seen in relatively orthodox ways, to be aesthetically valued.

Much of the difficulty—my difficulty, at any rate—with this new work is semantic. The terms “art” and “aesthetic evaluation” seem to belong to an order of effort and experience different from that described by Burnham (and others elsewhere). I’m not arguing for either anthropomorphism or design as a fixed criterion of art. (Though I certainly am not prejudiced against them.) I note Burnham’s interest in technologies as communicators of human mysteries. But so is psychoanalysis; does that make it art? Mowed fields and mailed boxes and similar efforts seem to me an order of experience that needs a new terminology. It always surprises me that devisers of “spontaneous” works or of works intended to close the gap between life and art still hunger for the old terms and for, essentially, the old recognitions. It’s almost as if Eldridge Cleaver secretly yearned for the Congressional Medal of Honor. New terms, new *purposes* in evaluation—if any evaluation is to be done at all—would be helpful, I think, to such devisers and others.

Those who *can* apply the term “art” to these new, frequently solipsist works may find some cheer in this book. For others, like me, these essays—those that really deal with the subject—leave us still with the problem: the future of art in communities without ethical or spiritual community, in a society whose values remain impervious to the needs of change. (Marcuse holds out only another type of slow asphyxiation.) The future of art remains the most pressing question of our cultural lives. It was doubtless romantic to hope for “answers” from this book. But if one didn’t still hope—against reason—for some sort of answer, why would one read a book like this at all?

***Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, by Richard H. Pells (Saturday Review, 3 July 1973)**

Here are some comments on American society:

Many radicals did not really understand what kinds of circumstances could produce and sustain a movement of basic social change.

Yet the major impediment [to revolution] . . . was not the weakness of the working class but the incredible endurance of bourgeois values and habits among all Americans.

“Culture” became synonymous with a middle-class hunger for status, and most people remained content to worship at the altar of power and success.

There no longer seemed to be any unifying purpose in which men could believe. What distinguished [this period] from earlier crises was this sense of decomposition at every level of public and private life.

All these comments, which seem so pertinent to the America of the last decade, were written about the 1930s. They were either formulated by leading social critics of that

time or have been deduced by Richard H. Pells, a young historian writing today in his book *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Harper & Row, 424 pp.)

But parallels between the 1930s and today are not Pells's chief interest; in fact, they strike me more forcefully than they ever strike him. He has examined the Depression decade primarily to show the relation in that crisis between the flow of history and the work of intellectuals and artists: to examine the effect of the social conditions on the culture and the attempts of intellectuals and artists to respond to and influence those conditions.

This is an important theme, though eventually an ironic one, and Pells has put fervor and respectable intelligence into it. His book falls into three parts: the first 160 pages treat the social-political atmosphere from the early twenties to the mid-thirties; the next 140 pages deal with some of the arts during the entire decade of the thirties; and in the last 100 pages he picks up from the first section to continue the social-political story until the Second World War. To a reader whose priorities are just the reverse of his, Pells seems much more confident with social and political analysis than with the arts. In the middle section he relies more on the judgment of others than he does elsewhere, his grip seems less firm, and his ventures into strong critical opinion are sometimes extravagant.

He begins his discussion of the social-political atmosphere with the Progressives; so, inevitably, his first major figure is Herbert Croly, with *The Promise of American Life*. Croly and the next major figure, Van Wyck Brooks, did their relevant work before 1920, and Pells argues that during the twenties there was "a gradual retreat from the values of the mind—at least on the part of those writers still concerned with politics—which may have been the decade's most damaging legacy to the 1930s." (Even the decade of the twenties supplies a parallel with today: Pells notes that "every new bohemian community and every new experimental magazine were rapidly absorbed by the advertising industry and the commercial press.")

The next decade, under stress of circumstance, tried to repair this ideological lack. Tracing this effort, Pells makes a number of comments that strike home to one who lived through the time. Example: "Those who rejected liberalism did so in the final analysis because, beyond its political and ideological defects, it no longer seemed an emotionally satisfying guide to life." And: the equation of socialism with Russia "often led to an obsession with the Soviet Union on the part of both sympathizers and critics, rather than to a sustained exploration of Marxist ideas."

Pells discusses many social critics in this section, but for him there were five writers who were the principal producers of "the beginning of an ideology that seemed appropriate to the new conditions of American life": John Dewey, Lewis Mumford, Robert Lynd, Sidney Hook, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Four of the five wrote their relevant works before the decade was half over. Pells analyzes their books, showing the relations and reactions among these men, and sees them proceeding to one central result: "They succeeded in preserving a tenuous balance between liberalism and Marxism, morality and politics, . . . the desire for psychologically satisfying myths and the need for a coherent social theory."

When Pells returns to politics in the concluding section of his book, he describes the period of the Popular Front, when the stratagem devised in 1935 by the Seventh Communist International to unite all anti-Fascists against the rise of fascism was used in the United States by the American Communist Party with great success. A glow of fraternity suffused most factions on the Left because of the change in

Communist tone. A slogan that Pells doesn't quote—Communism Is Twentieth-Century Americanism—was a rallying cry to bring together the previously divided.

Curiously, and most unsatisfyingly, he underplays the effect of the Spanish Civil War on American intellectual thought and life—failing, for instance, even to mention the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Still, Pells has performed a service to our historical understanding of the period by finely calibrating the differences and contradictions operating within a cultural life that is often thought of as “proletarian” or “radical” *en bloc*. In dealing with the era of the Popular Front, for instance, he examines the opposition to it, not only from conservatives but from radicals who were anti-Stalinist—those radicals centered on the *Partisan Review* and V. F. Calverton's *Modern Quarterly*. And here again Pells establishes another parallel with the present, though he doesn't explicitly make the point. The American Communist party went through three major contradictory stances in the thirties: the anti-capitalist revolutionary stage, the brothers-with-every-anti-Fascist stage, and the post-Nazi-Soviet-Pact stage. In each of these stages, whether one was pro- or anti-Communist, the U.S.S.R. called the tune of response. This has also been true, of course, during the entire mirror-image period of latter-day cold war foreign policy.

Pells's discussion of the arts begins with an adequate chapter summarizing literary theory of the time, including a pertinent note on Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, that brilliant study of symbolism marred by early 1930s touches of utilitarianism. When Pells turns to fiction, however, his diction begins to reveal his uneasiness. For instance, after listing the sociological contents of James T. Farrell's trilogy, he says: “Farrell's supreme achievement was to compress this raw data into the character of Studs Lonigan.” This concept—that a novelist compresses raw data into a character—is a good sample of a clumsiness that haunts the author's artistic judgments. Again, in discussing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Pells says that when Hemingway treated the larger issues of the Spanish war, he “portrayed Spain through a series of metaphors only an American could really understand.” Aside from the book's record of foreign publication, three people who praised it very early (says Carlos Baker) were former commanders in the Loyalist army, named Hans Kahle, Gustavo Durán, and Mirko Markovich.

And then, at the end of his analysis of literature, Pells calls James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* “the decade's greatest literary achievement.” I happen to think that Agee's book weathers the years somewhat shakily, that it contains some of his worst self-indulgence as well as some of his finest lyricism and keenest observation, that it is drenched in an arrogance of purity; still, it isn't necessary to derogate Agee in order to question Pells's judgment about a decade that produced such works as Faulkner's *Light in August* and some of Hemingway's best short stories, Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and three books of poetry by Wallace Stevens. Speaking of poetry, it is completely ignored by Pells. Fitzgerald himself is skipped because he “did not fit into any category on which I was relying” (along, with O'Neill, O'Hara, and Wolfe), although Pells says on the previous page that he “wished to avoid as much as possible the traditional categories of analysis.”

This same uneasiness continues through his chapter on theater and film, revealed through his eagerness to coin ringing statements. He says, for instance, that “the radical theater could not succeed as long as the surrounding institutions remained unaltered.” Certainly the idea of political theater—a theater that wants audiences to come in order to be changed—remains debatable, but what Pells has said is that the

medicine won't work while the patient is sick. Because of this, he continues, "for most playwrights, actors, directors, designers, and critics, there was really only one place to turn"—the mass media. I would challenge his use of the word "most." (Harold Clurman, to whose *Fervent Years* Pells refers, flatly contradicts him as regards the members of the Group Theater.) And Pells makes no case for the notion that, apart from theoretical discussion, a great many artists turned from the relatively inexpensive theater to relatively expensive radio and film in order to radicalize a capitalist society.

In his discussion of film Pells omits the one outstanding Hollywood picture of the thirties to deal with Depression economics—King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread*. (And Vidor was not an émigré from the theater.) Pells's long list of Hollywood's "peculiarly anarchic personalities" includes Spencer Tracy, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, James Stewart, and Jean Arthur. If those are anarchic personalities, would he please name some traditional ones?

Furthermore, he says that where Agee had synthesized "the novel and the documentary into a new instrument for *seeing* reality," Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* fused the film medium's basic elements "into a new way of *thinking* about the world." Lately we've been snowed by a blizzard of unhelpful comments on *Citizen Kane*, and Pells only adds to the heap. Besides, he soon contradicts himself. He says that "Welles was bidding farewell to an age that had relied on rational theories and logical arguments." Isn't that bidding farewell to thinking? "In their place he seemed to suggest that the new forms of media could more effectively inspire the human imagination and point it in revolutionary directions." Lumpy though that statement is, it contains some truth that again contradicts his first claim.

A good deal of Pell's book is written in this starchy, Sunday-best prose. And the author is an abject slave of what I call the False Conditional. "If Berle and Means chose to call for a kind of welfare capitalism under liberal direction, others decided at this point to abandon private enterprise altogether." If? But Berle and Means *did* choose welfare capitalism. What's the "if" for? Just a stale rhetorical device that Pells uses over and over.

Shortcomings and all, however, Pells's book makes at least two important points. First, "the real significance of proletarian literature seemed to lie in its effect on the artist himself." Second, the American intellectual is the servant of events, though he generally considers himself their master. The wind shifts to the north, and the intellectual writes a book approving or deploring, explaining why it happened and what lies ahead of the United States in northdom. The wind shifts south, and he does the same thing for southdom. He aims at influence but has very little—otherwise my quotations at the outset would no longer apply. But in his illusion that he is influencing events, the intellectual writes a unique *history* of events, acute and valuable; it is in describing this history that Pells is at his best.

***Hollywood Speaks*, by Mike Steen (New Republic, 27 July 1974), and *Talking Pictures*, by Sylvia Shorris & Marion Abbott Bundy (New Republic, 27 June 1994)**

One of my favorite kinds of film book consists of interviews with professionals. If the subjects are responsive and if they stick to their mutttons without overmuch theory and afflatus, the talk is interesting and uniquely enlightening. Like most other good ideas, the interview idea is not new: Kevin Brownlow, François



Truffaut, and Charles Thomas Samuels are just three of the people who have produced valuable film books in this way; now Mike Steen has produced another. His aim in *Hollywood Speaks* (Putnam, 379 pp.) was to create "An Oral History"; it is not quite, as Brownlow's book is. But Steen, who has worked in pictures in several ways, has done a small social-cultural cross-section of a day gone by.

He has interviewed at some length twenty-five people who worked in various arts and crafts of film, almost all of them active through the high Hollywood era. Steen is not exactly a mental giant (and his attention to name-spelling wanders), but he had the prime requirements for his job: some knowledge of the field professionally and the ability to get his subjects to open up.

I can't remember a better interview with an actor than the fifty-five pages of Henry Fonda here, in which Fonda tells in rich vernacular the story of his professional life, including lots of revealing comments about stage vs. film acting. His narrative is from inside his skin, but since we know what he looks like and what his persona is, we can see how theater and film executives spotted him when he first appeared, what they discerned in him, why they used him as they did. And he substantiates in detail what was clear in his recent one-man show *Clarence Darrow*: that a clever and intricate craftsman lies beneath his surface, that the particular triumph of his art has been to seem artless. ("Don't let them see the wheels go around," says Fonda.)

Fonda is categorized here as Leading Actor. There are also interviews with Leading Actress (Rosalind Russell), Character Player (the late Agnes Moorehead), Screenwriter, Director, and Composer; less predictable and at least equally interesting are interviews with Art Director, Set Director, Costume Designer, Special Visual Effects Man, and others. All of them are shorter than the Fonda interview; none of them is dull. Among other things, the collection gives us a view of the Great Trek, how people of many professions got into pictures from all over the country—a hairstylist, for instance.

The shoptalk is what I find especially fascinating. For instance the late Perc Westmore, who speaks here for Make-up, says that on the third day of a Bogart film he noted a couple of tiny bald spots on the star's scalp. Over Bogart's protests Westmore at once began working on a full wig for him. Westmore had recognized a nervous condition that would, and did, make Bogart lose all his hair temporarily. (It was serious within three more days.) Westmore says the picture was *Casablanca*, but from the details—about a haircut that Bogart got from a Mexican barber in the film and what this meant for Westmore in progressive toupee-making—I think he must have meant *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

There's also a long interview with Hal Roach, Sr., who entered films in 1912, as the Pioneer Movie Producer. Roach tells how he started Harold Lloyd (but not how he missed Chaplin) and how later he became chief cinematic adviser to Mussolini. It's now a forgotten episode, much discussed at the time, here partially clarified.

A breezy, easy, informative book.

Just in time. That's the near-breathless feeling we're left with after finishing a collection of interviews conducted by Sylvia Shorris and Marion Abbott Bundy. *Talking Pictures* (The New Press, 372 pp.) presents reminiscences of people who worked in films back in the high Hollywood days—some of them began even earlier—when there were humming studios, each turning out fifty to sixty features per year along with short subjects and, in some cases, newsreels. Thirty-four of these thirty-eight interviews were finished by 1986 when the subjects were in their eighties; seventeen of them died before this book went to press. (No reason is given as to why

the book took eight years to appear.) This is eyewitness oral history, set down at almost the last minute.

Shorris and Bundy were not interested in glamorous figures: they wanted to investigate the lives of artisans and artists who had done the less publicized work that helped to give the famous their fame. We've had books of interviews with film editors or cinematographers or designers or writers, and in 1974 Mike Steen published *Hollywood Speaks*, an invaluable set of interviews with various film professionals, but these books featured celebrities. Shorris and Bundy were after the rank and file: the only people in their book who may be known to the general public are the director André de Toth, the composer Jule Styne, and the lyricist Sammy Cahn.

In her introduction Shorris says:

As we got deeper into our interviews, we made a great discovery. The people who worked in the industry in those years, even the humblest of them, were not merely laborers without interest or understanding. . . . They were a proud cadre of master builders, men and women who knew they were in at the creation of a new art form.

If we allow for some affectionate expansion on the editors' part, the statement is borne out.

The first subject is Arthur Jacobson, aged eighty-four in 1985, who became an assistant director in Hollywood but who, as a high school kid, wangled a petty job in the Biograph studio on 175<sup>th</sup> Street in the Bronx. After Jacobson we meet at least one of the following: production managers, camera operators, readers, script girls, sound men, carpenters, costume designers, property masters, extras, stunt women, dancers, film editors, and more. One agent. One booker. Even one producer's assistant, who insists on anonymity because she tells how she was harassed for sexual favors. Most of the interviews include a photograph of the subject, taken back then.

The insights into the nitty-gritty of filmmaking are profuse. In some of the occupations—sound recording and cinematography, for instance—a medieval-guild air pervades, with apprentices working their way up under masters. One negative freedom in all these people is their nonconcern with the overall quality of the films they worked on. This didn't breed cynicism in them. A surgeon isn't cynical just because he's unconcerned with his patient's character: he just wants to get the inflamed appendix out neatly.

But these film people, and their colleagues, worked so well in their fields that they helped to put Hollywood in the forefront (where it still is) of world film success. The making of American films was so fine, so much better than much local production around the globe, that they overwhelmed questions of credibility and depth. Superb Hollywood craft sustained seductive Hollywood fantasy.

Inevitably a book of this kind includes wry "backstage" glimpses: here are some samples. Eleanor Wolquitt, a reader for a studio, "absolutely flipped" for a novel by Douglas Wallop called *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* and recommended it to her bosses. They "passed on it." In other hands it became *Damn Yankees*, a Broadway hit and a film, and which is now again on Broadway.

George Folsey began as a studio odd-jobs boy:

One of my duties was to get everybody's lunch. I used to get [Adolph] Zukor's sardine sandwich at a little Jewish delicatessen below the studio. I

used to get [Edwin S.] Porter's lunch from a Chinese restaurant, and two Pittsburgh stogies. Then they would send me to get Jack Barrymore's lunch. I used to go to a nearby hotel or restaurant. . . .

In time Folsey became a cinematographer who worked with, among others, Irene Dunne. He noticed that, in the course of a take, "a little black mark would appear on her chin. . . . I decided that it had to be some kind of muscle; it had to be something that appeared as a result of her talking." So he set up a small spotlight on a swivel, ordered an aide to keep it pointed at Dunne's chin and to bring up that light on a cue from him. It killed the black mark.

Arthur Jacobson tells us that, in the making of *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, Edmund Gwenn, who played Santa Claus, "had a little problem. He never knew when he was going to urinate." This problem could be handled in short scenes, but it made for difficulty in the long sequence of the Macy's Christmas parade. "So we dressed him very, very warmly, and we rigged a funnel with a long pipe trailing out of the sleigh. That's picture-making."

One of the most enlightening interviews is with Linwood Gale Dunn, a visual effects director of photography and inventor of a special-effects optical printer. Dunn was one of those technicians who get special awards during the Oscar broadcasts (he got his in 1981) while the audience waits impatiently for more glitz. One of his most notable collaborations was with Orson Welles on *Citizen Kane*. (The photo here of Dunn and his invention also appears in Robert Carringer's *The Making of "Citizen Kane"*.) Many will remember the sequence in which the camera moves down through the rain-streaked skylight of the nightclub where Susan Alexander is singing. Dunn explains how the camera goes through the glass.

We can all be glad Shorris and Bundy outpaced the Grim Reaper. Their book is a tidy hoard of welcome sentiment and little-known fact.

***Hollywood UK*, by Alexander Walker (*New Republic*, 21 September 1974)**

The English film critic Alexander Walker has written a history of an interesting epoch—the British film industry in the 1960s. *Hollywood UK* (Stein & Day, 493 pp.) is a title that itself contains the nub of one major element: Walker develops it well and surrounds it with a full account of a complicated cultural-economic phenomenon.

From its earliest days the history of the British film industry has been extraordinary, mostly for negative reasons. A good deal of the technological pre-history of the film took place in Great Britain, after which one might have thought that a nation of great dramatists and actors and leading theater directors might have gone on to contribute mightily to film. Not so. For a complex of reasons that included a silly censorship and the U.S. domination of domestic screens, British development was slow. Allowing for some exceptional pictures, no major European country—other than Spain—made so negligible a film contribution as Britain before World War II.

After the war we got the flood of so-called Ealing comedies—e.g., *The Man in the White Suit*, *Passport to Pimlico*—successfully selling quirky English humor to a world that glowed with Anglophilia. Then in the mid 1950s, where Walker takes up his story, a change took place. Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, and Tony Richardson became leaders of a movement called Free Cinema, which coincided more or less with the arrival in the theater of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, and Britain began to

take a socially real look at itself. By 1960 we got such pictures as *Room at the Top* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. They were successful. And American companies, which had never been quite absent, moved in strongly.

"Foreign filmmakers," so Walker quotes Stanley Donen, "felt they had only to get to England, start making a film, and somehow the excitement of life here would rub off on it." Hollywood tried to cash in on the British upsurge, particularly since production cost less cash than in the United States. By 1969, of the forty-five British features shown on the two main British theater circuits, 78% were wholly or partly American financed.

The social realist vein was mined heavily through the early 1960s, but though it wasn't played out in quality, it faded at the box office. Then in 1963 came *Billy Liar* with Julie Christie. "With Julie Christie, the British cinema caught the train south," Walker says, neatly summing up the move from locales in the North and the Midlands to London. (He likes the line so much he virtually repeats it 120 pages further on.) Social realism went: we got *Tom Jones*, the luckiest film ever made, the James Bond pictures, which were the biggest smashes in British film history, and the Beatles pictures. All of these had several American fingers in their pies.

But matters were not going well despite these successes. Television was gobbling away at the number of film theaters, and expenses were going up. One reason that Britain had a worse time with expenses than, say, Sweden, was that American financing had pushed union standards higher. A cruel contradiction became increasingly apparent: there wasn't a big enough domestic market for the kind of pictures that Britain wanted to make and the kind of money they cost. And, prodded by American interests to broaden their interests, British producers' judgment of the international market was, in mildest terms, erratic.

This aspect is not heavily enough underscored by Walker. British troubles, bad enough in themselves, were grievously aggravated by stupid British decisions. When Bryan Forbes was brought in to save one of the four remaining major studios in 1969, he announced fourteen projects, most of which turned out to be disasters, one of which had to be abandoned, and one of which was finished and never released.

On the whole Walker tells his story well, with plenty of good detail and with quotations from his own interviews with leading figures. But in a way his book is itself a microcosm of its subject: it combines industry and some ability with a big splash of myopia. Some examples: Albert Finney came to New York in 1963 to play in *Luther* at the time that *Tom Jones* was released, and, Walker says, no other English actor had been so "fêted and courted." Not Noël Coward or Laurence Olivier? Walker says, in a smitch of *auteur* fog, that "*Billy Liar* is an offshoot from *A Kind of Loving*." Both were directed by John Schlesinger, but how could *Billy*, from a novel by Keith Waterhouse and a play by Waterhouse and Willis Hall, be offshot by Schlesinger from one of his previous films? Walker reports that Joseph Losey said at the premiere of *The Servant* that "it is the story of Faust" and that Losey "has never ceased to regret this oversimplification. For *The Servant* is not a simple allegory of good versus evil." Which makes the story of Faust a simple allegory and *The Servant* more complex. Live and learn. Walker says *The Knack* was "luckier in its timing" than *One-Way Pendulum*. It's also a hell of a lot better. He says of *The Madwoman of Chaillot* that Forbes gave "elegance and a redeeming fantastication to Giraudoux's simple-minded fable." Not in the print I saw. And Immanuel Kant would have seemed simple-minded in the hands of the people involved in that film.

But it's when he discusses Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* that Walker gives his

best example of how to sound critically wise while actually talking balls:

It is easy . . . to criticize the verse-speaking on the ground that it doesn't make the most of Shakespeare; but when the verse-speaking is infused with such physical passion, then the poetry of love is a glorious bonus to the experience.

Where does "the poetry of love" come from if the verse-speaking doesn't do justice to Shakespeare? And shall we now all hurry along to a *Tristan and Isolde* with two leads who can't sing but who can infuse the music with physical passion, with Wagner as a glorious bonus?

Walker's book is a decently written, well-researched chronicle of a period that may retrospectively turn out to have been more sadly wasteful than we yet know. But Walker's percepts and critical comments are not much of a bonus, glorious or otherwise.

***The Film Encyclopedia*, by Ephraim Katz (*New Republic*, 29 December 1978)**

What do we want from an encyclopedia? Everything. We want it to list every person and subject in its field with every relevant fact about every entry, and with some helpful opinion besides. No lesser an ideal can possibly serve as criterion for the compilation or the judging of an encyclopedia if it is going to be any good at all. Every encyclopedia fails, obviously, by that necessary standard, but we don't know anything about its quality without that standard.

The odd fact is that, through some perversity perhaps, this standard presses even more strongly in the case of the one-volume encyclopedia: and even *more* strongly when the one-volume encyclopedia is written by one author. It's as if the double act of daring—conciseness and sole authorship—implied special self-confidence.

The best one-volume, one-author, one-field encyclopedia that I know is *Modern World Drama*, by Myron Matlaw (Dutton, 1972). A new good one has just published: *The Film Encyclopedia*, by Ephraim Katz (Crowell). Need I say that I haven't read every line of its large, double-columned 1266 pages? I read the A, B, and C sections and leafed through the rest; and it seems a very useful tool. Paradoxically, part of the book's value is in its deviation from the ideal, its deliberate circumscription. Katz and his publishers decided not to include any photographs and not to deal with individual films: he has concentrated on people and on subjects. To his entries on people, he adds lists of films with which they were concerned, and he indicates whether or not the list is complete. The book needs supplementing with, say, *Dictionary of Films*, by Georges Sadoul and Peter Morris (University of California Press, 1972); but, by and large, it compensates to a considerable degree in depth for its concentration.

The first thing in the book's favor is its design. It's a capacious size without clumsiness, and the layout of the page is inviting. (The designer was Abigail Moseley.) If you don't think design is influential, you don't know your own unconscious. Second, Katz writes well enough, sometimes a bit better than that. Third, his research has uncovered some new material, including odd facts.

Examples of the last: Did you know that Harry Carey, the early Western star, was born in the Bronx and went to New York University? That Bill Cosby has a doctorate in education? That the real first name of Mauritz Stiller, the Swedish

director who brought Garbo to America, was Moshe? That the word “bazooka,” now used for a piece of lighting equipment and derived from the army’s portable rocket launcher, originally came from the wind instrument made popular by the old radio and film comedian Bob Burns?

Compare Katz’s book with two competitors. Probably the most widely used one-volume film encyclopedia in English is *The Filmgoer’s Companion*, by Leslie Halliwell (Hill and Wang/Avon, 1977), now in its sixth edition. Halliwell has wretched entries on subjects and on national histories, some instant-dried synopses of notable films, and a great many biographical entries with a line or two of description in most cases and with both complete and incomplete filmographies. The trouble with Halliwell is the sparseness of descriptive material. On the other hand, most of his prose is so silly that extension would only make it hard to bear. (About *City Lights*: “Comedy over-flooded with sentiment, but some brilliant moments.”)

Katz’s most recently published competitor that I know is *The Oxford Companion to Film*, edited by Liz-Anne Bawden (Oxford University Press, 1976). I can’t say that increased acquaintance raises my respect for it. I recently looked up the entry for *Citizen Kane*, read the first line, “Press magnate Kane dies in his west-coast palace of Xanadu”—in fact, Xanadu is in Florida—and shut the book. But the entries for individual films, over 700 of them, may be the worst feature of the *OCF*. It does have some diagrams for its technical entries and occasional bibliographical references, which Katz does not.

The apparently inescapable disproportions in length are present in Katz, as well. Equal space for Yasujiro Ozu and Ford Beebe. (No, I had never heard of Beebe, either.) Birth and death dates are not always given. (And Katz has an obsession with cancer: except for unnatural causes of death like accident or suicide, the only cause he mentions is cancer, and he does it often.) Some of the entries are utterly flavorless, like the one for John Abbott, a flavorful actor. Some are only weak gestures. The whole comment on A. I. Bezzerides: “American screenwriter of masculine hard-hitting fare.” Not even a birth date.

But on the whole the book is juicy and intelligent, and some of the entries—on Antonioni, Bergman, Fellini, the United States—are surely as sound as one could expect in the circumstances. No one, including Katz, will be astonished to learn he hasn’t achieved the encyclopedia ideal, but his long haul was well worth the trouble. (And note that the *OCF*, which was written by a large team, has only 767 pages—similar pages, too.)

### ***The White Album*, by Joan Didion (*New Republic*, 4 & 11 August 1979)**

Joan Didion’s new collection of articles *The White Album* (Simon & Schuster, 222 pp.), widely and well reviewed, now on bestseller lists, includes a piece called “In Hollywood.” The first two-thirds of it consist of anecdotes about life and business in the film world; then she talks about my film criticism, adversely. Herewith some comments on her comments.

Her main ground, developed out of her insider’s anecdotes, is that film critics don’t really know how Hollywood works. (It’s not her only complaint about me: she also doesn’t like my prose.) Speaking of “what both Fellini and Truffaut have called the ‘circus’ aspect of making film,” an atmosphere with which she says I am “temperamentally at odds,” she says that my “idea of a nasty disclosure about the circus is to reveal that the aerialist is up there to get our attention.”

This whets the appetite. Light is about to be shed. But what is the “nasty disclosure” from this expert who is in tune with the circus aspect? What’s the undeluded truth from deep in the heart of Hollywood? Brace yourselves, fellow-yokels. Pictures, Didion reveals, are produced to make money! She quotes, from a review of mine, a remark that *Bullitt* may have had a “possible propagandistic motive: to show (particularly to the young) that law and order are not necessarily Dullsville.” Didion sets this knowingly to rights: “The motive in *Bullitt* was to show that several million people would pay three dollars apiece to watch Steve McQueen drive fast.”

After he recovers his breath, a critic, even an Easterner, even one who has never signed a “step” deal to write a screenplay, might gasp out that he had sort of assumed that. He also assumes that every film is made, every play produced, every novel published with the hope of making money; but this fact doesn’t exclude the results from aesthetic judgment or an assay of cultural effect because these particular profit-seeking enterprises are done in media of art.

This would not weigh with Didion, however, at least as far as films are concerned. She says: “A finished picture defies all attempts to analyze what makes it work or not work: the responsibility for its every frame is clouded not only in the accidents and compromises of production but in the clauses of its financing.” Yes, attributions by critics often do look odd to those who know the “backstage” story on any production. (See the piece called “Who Did It?” in my book *Persons of the Drama*.) But if you take the Didion dictum as law, you must not praise Sally Field for her acting in *Norma Rae* or Martin Ritt for his direction. It was “accident or compromise” that sustained Field when she jumped up on the table in that factory, that helped Ritt to help her performance and that forced him to shoot the reactions of the workers at their machines. You may not only *not* attribute any achievement to those two, you must understand that you can’t do so because of 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox’s arrangements with its banks.

For Didion, the basic impossibility of film criticism (as distinct in her mind, I assume, from other criticism) seems to derive from the big sums involved in film production. Through her wry anecdotes gleams an awe of the millions of dollars she is being ironical about. Over her remarks on film criticism hangs the perfume of the *nouveau riche*. She says: “Making judgments on films is in many ways so peculiarly vaporous an occupation that the only question is why, beyond the obvious opportunities for a few lecture fees and a little careerism at a dispiritingly self-limiting level, anyone does it in the first place.” How redolent this is of the six-figure-income *parvenu*, looking downward. (Before she moved upward, Didion herself wrote film reviews. I guess that was “the first place.”)

What’s amusing is that she calls film criticism “dispiritingly self-limiting” right after her stories, in this very article, about the ethics, intellect, and character of her present environment. The reason that she accepts this environment is, obviously, money. So her label for the critical profession would more accurately read “financially self-limiting.”

Beneath and beyond all this are some facts that Didion, hailed as a truth-teller for our time, leaves out. The reader of *The White Album* could not know that this Hollywood article first appeared—in the *New York Review of Books*, March 22, 1973—as a review of two books, one of them (*Figures of Light*) by me. My book had been published in 1971; why had she reached back two years to review it? Just possibly because I had lambasted two films on which she had collaborated—*The Panic in Needle Park* and *Play It As It Lays* (made from a novel of hers)—in the *New*

*Republic* of June 26, 1971, and December 9, 1972, respectively. There is no law requiring the subject of a blasting review to love the blaster; there is perhaps an ethical need for the subject to declare a bias when reviewing the reviewer. In the *New York Review*, Didion came on as if objective. In *The White Album* there is no mention at all that the piece was originally a book review: it's made to look like random, untargted reflections.

I wrote to the *New York Review of Books* at the time, noting the possible flaw in her objectivity. I also noted that she had misquoted a phrase of mine (which, by the way, she dug out of an earlier book, not the one she was nominally reviewing). In reply—this, I assure you, is true—Didion said that she had deliberately misquoted the phrase as “a small kindness” to me. Now, though she has otherwise revised the piece for her book, she has not corrected this misquotation. Having given herself what may be the noblest motive for deliberate misquotation in the history of literature, she persists in doing me the “small kindness.”

An impartial reader of her article, who knew all the facts that Didion doesn't give, might infer that Didion felt forced to prove the incompetence of a critic who doesn't like her work, that she reached back two years for an occasion, and that she couldn't come up with anything much more substantive than that this critic isn't privy to Hollywood deals and doesn't know that pictures are made to make money. But it doesn't matter that she can't come up with anything more because film criticism is impossible anyway. And even if it is possible, it's vaporous.

This process of retrospective justification seems to run in the Didion household. Her husband and screen collaborator, John Gregory Dunne, last year published a collection of articles called *Quintana and Friends*, including a review of some books by another film critic. Dunne wrote this review for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* in 1973—about the same time that Didion was publishing her piece in the *New York Review of Books*. In the course of his article, Dunne takes a healthy swipe at me. Why not? you may ask. I agree: except that, first, Dunne doesn't mention my pans of his films (although he stipulates this about the critic he's really reviewing), and, second, I couldn't help noting his change of mind. In 1966 Dunne had sent me a letter saying that I wrote “the only movie column since James Agee's worth reading. . . .” Never mind what you think of his opinion; I'm quoting. He said further that it was “always a delight to read someone (a) who liked movies and (b) knew something about them.”

What could have happened to me in the intervening seven years? Utter disintegration, I suppose, as proved by my reviews of those two Didion-Dunne films.

***When the Shooting Stops*, by Ralph Rosenblum (*New Republic*, 17 November 1979)**

“The foundation of film art is *editing*.” That's the first line of Vsevolod Pudovkin's introduction to his *Film Technique*. But he wasn't thinking of editing as it's generally practiced today: to him editing was an inseparable part of the director's function. He said further: “. . . the material of the film director consists not of real processes happening in real space and real time, but of those pieces of celluloid on which these processes have been recorded.” The key word is “director”; editing was seen as, not merely his prerogative, but his reason for being. Today editing is the director's possible privilege: to have “final cut,” or any cut at all. To Pudovkin and his contemporaries, the question did not exist.



When did the completely separate profession of film editing emerge, as distinct from editing assistant to a director? I can't find any clear historical account of it. (Doctoral students of film! A gap to be filled?) But take, as an instance, the filmography of D. W. Griffith. The first time a film editor is credited is on his last picture, *The Struggle* (1931); we can assume that previously Griffith had done all the editing himself.

It's easy to infer that, as production was stepped up in every filmmaking country, as more and more directors had to be employed who wanted to be, or who were allowed to be, only craftsmen on assembly lines, those assembly lines had also to include editors. At some point in the history of the Broadway musical, there was a cognate development. The composer stopped being a composer and became a tune writer; someone else, called the orchestrator, came in to finish the job, to convert the tunes into the music that was played in the theater. That two-man composing-team idea would have been inconceivable to a well-trained musician like (to leave Olympians out of it) Victor Herbert. The two-man directing-editing team would have been inconceivable to early filmmakers. Perhaps a cultural-historical relation exists between the rise of the professional film editor and the professional orchestrator.

None of this is to argue against the importance of the film editor. Quite the contrary. As the director became more constricted or less competent or even less interested, the editor's importance grew.

Now, inevitably, comes the first book on a film editor's life and work (not the first book on the subject of film editing as such). *When the Shooting Stops . . . The Cutting Begins: A Film Editor's Story* (Viking, 310 pp.) is about the prominent editor Ralph Rosenblum, who wrote it with Robert Karen. You don't have to go past the first paragraph to see that it's not well written, but many of the anecdotes and experiences in the book are enlightening. The sheerly autobiographical sections (which contain yet *more* about childhood love of movies) ought to have been condensed, and the potted history of editing—as an idea and art—repeats a lot of other sources. (And Rosenblum doesn't give Georges Méliès as much credit as some film historians do.) Some of the films he discusses at length are not really memorable: *The Night They Raided Minsky's*, *A Thousand Clowns*. The highest reaches in his career are *The Pawnbroker* and the later Woody Allen films. (However, he did work as an assistant on Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story*.) This fact makes editing seem a profession that can be practiced well despite the quality of the material. To the extent that this is true—and to that extent it's also true of the orchestrator—the book is a bit depressing. But on the whole Rosenblum is a good publicist for a generally ignored art.

One personal point—not niggling, I hope. He notes wryly (misspelling my name) that, in my review of *Goodbye, Columbus* (in the *New Republic* of April 12, 1969), I failed to include him among those responsible for the poor taste in the wedding scene. "He mislabeled the villains, a typical problem in film criticism." True enough: attribution is a continuing, insoluble problem in film and theater criticism. But he omits to mention that, later in that very review, I gave a barebones sketch of the Eisenstein and Pudovkin approaches to editing and described how heavily this director had used them with Rosenblum's "rather tense assistance." So he can't complain that I wholly failed to reprove him.

Two other matters. Rosenblum's charge that the public doesn't appreciate the editor's contribution is also true of other film contributors. Comparable books for the general reader on those other professions could be useful. Sound-mixing, for instance.

I once did a TV program with a leader in that field, Dick Vorisek, in which he showed a sequence of *America, America* as he had received it from the director Elia Kazan with “live” sound, recorded on location; then showed how he had enlivened this dull sequence—which took place on a mountain—by feeding voices through an echo chamber, fading in bird song, and so on. This was a simple job. The sound-mixer’s work sometimes involves the blending of a dozen or sixteen tracks; but simple or complex, he often—and often without the director, I’m told—aids mightily in the final work, in more than technical ways.

Second, if, after you’ve read Rosenblum, you want to find out more on the fascinating subject of film editing, read *The Technique of Film Editing*, by Karel Reisz (the director) and Gavin Millar (published by Hastings House). It can be understood by any interested layman. This is an excellent book that integrates technique and aesthetic purpose.

***Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, by Richard Roud (*New Republic*, 10 May 1980)**

When the film critic Robin Wood reviewed *The Oxford Companion to Film* (*Film Comment*, Nov.-Dec. 1976), he lambasted it for its inaccuracies and general mindlessness and, lastly, for the tone of its critical comments. “All personal commitments have to be left on the doorstep, along with anything radical, subversive, or controversial.” Wood surely knew at the time about the preparation of the work I’m reviewing here, to which he is a principal contributor; presumably he was making a tacit comparison. However, this new work shows that the qualities he missed in the *OCF* don’t necessarily produce a solid book.

*Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* was edited by Richard Roud, director of the New York Film Festival and a critic in England, is in two volumes totaling 1,121 double-columned pages, is generously illustrated, and is published by Viking Press at \$75. There are about 240 articles by forty-two contributors, including Roud. I’ll discuss some aspects of the work in ascending order of importance.

*Photographs.* Most of them are well enough chosen and printed. The decision to omit portraits of the directors, and to use only stills from their films, is understandable as a choice, but then why nineteen two-page spreads of single photographs? This decision is odd because the stills chosen for blow-up don’t need it. I’d except the shots from *Eclipse*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and *New Tales of the Taira Clan* (although the distributor’s label should have been airbrushed out of the last).

*Selections.* No editor can score 100% with any reader here, probably not even with himself. Still, here are one reader’s queries on persons selected for discussion. Why exclude (for instance) Julien Duvivier, John Cromwell, and Philippe de Broca when (for instance) Rowland Brown, Vittorio Cottafavi, and Per Lindberg are included? Which of these trios is of more concern to most users of this work? In a dictionary that, outside of directors, deals with only a few actors and a few “periods,” why an entry on Hong Kong cinema? Why joint entries for René Clément and Henri-Georges Clouzot, for Carol Reed and David Lean? The excuse is that, in each case, the two names are often linked, but on that ground why not joint entries for Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, for John Ford and Howard Hawks?

*Ground Rules.* In terms of form, none. Some entries contain much biographical information, some little, some none. Even birth-and-death dates are not

always given. There are no filmographies as such, though often there are many citations. The reason for excluding complete data is obviously that Roud's emphasis is on commentary, but (a) the procedure varies widely and (b) the method, or lack of it, implies the reader's need for at least one concomitant reference work. (I suggest Ephraim Katz's recently published *Film Encyclopedia*.)

*Entries.* Most of the articles are substantial. Some directors—Carl Dreyer, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, Jean Renoir—get two articles by different authors, dealing with different periods in their careers. Why? Why not an overview by one critic, thus giving the reader a consistent frame of reference? Every article in the book has a postscript by Roud, more about which later.

I'm not going to quarrel with the opinions expressed in the articles, chiefly because I'm not yet World Commissar of Criticism, so *pro tem* I'm permitting divergence, and because I had only to glance at the list of contributors—let alone the name of the editor—to know that I was in for disagreements, many of them fundamental. But disagreements are integral to a critical work. My differences with *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* go beyond opinion.

The range of qualities in the articles stretches from those, of whatever critical stance, intended to enlighten down to the hermetic, self-promotive, cliquish, and deplorable. Here are some from the brighter end of the spectrum. Busby Berkeley and Kon Ichikawa are lucidly treated by John Gillett, W. C. Fields and Buster Keaton by David Robinson. D. W. Griffith and V. I. Pudovkin get intelligent, close analysis from Vlada Petric. (The biographical note on Petric refers to "her" previous works, which doubtless surprised him.) I also admired, among others, Elliott Stein on Frank Capra, André Hodeir on the Marx Brothers, P. Adams Sitney on Dmitri Kirsanoff, Claude Oilier on Josef von Sternberg, Giulio Cesare Castello on Italian silent cinema, and the late Henri Langlois on the origins of French cinema and of German cinema. (In the latter article Langlois develops the idea of the interrelation between German film and theater in the 1920s that was raised by Lotte Eisner in *The Haunted Screen*.) If I had to crown a favorite in the book, it would be Donald Richie on Kenji Mizoguchi, an article that seems to me exemplary for a dictionary of this kind.

The list of my dissatisfactions is longer. A few samples only. The entries by Noël Burch seem more polemics for a position in film theory than attempts to mediate between subject and reader. The entries by Jean-André Fieschi, translated from the French, seem exercises in flatulence. Fieschi on Harold Lloyd: ". . . idealism and realism mesh, in the man with the horn-rimmed glasses, like the workings of an automaton." So *that's* how automatons work. Fieschi's rhapsody on Jean-Marie Straub is so ecstatically useless that Roud has to write a very long prelude to it—the only such prelude—in order for the reader to decipher the piece.

John Russell Taylor, who contributes a great deal, tells us:

[Jean] Cocteau concentrated on another potentiality of the cinema: as well as moving an action around to many more locations than the theater would allow, it can come in closer, it can explore in more detail the geography of the human face, it can physically involve the spectator in the action instead of keeping him at the safe, uniform distance of the theater.

This news in itself is worth \$75.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who has written a dubious book on Luchino Visconti, adds to his dubiousness on that subject. "*Senso* is unashamedly expressionistic." Just

like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, eh? A critic who can use that term about one of the most romantic films in the world catalogue is demonstrably defective.

Robin Wood, in my view, goes through the same metamorphoses here as elsewhere. I often begin an article of his with an impression of intellect, lively and perceptive, and then I'm brought up short—not by difference of opinion but by leakage of film-journal gas. His entry on Leo McCarey is rewarding until one comes to the following: "The standard two-shot of the Hollywood cinema, in which the characters are balanced within the frame on terms of perfect equality, has a general significance as an expression of democracy which takes on particular meaning in the work of McCarey, where it becomes an artistic principle." This means, then, that two-shots were not "standard" outside Hollywood? That in Hollywood they were not used as a narrative device but for social-political implication? That McCarey consciously decided to enrich this social-political use with aesthetic values? And that Wood can discern the difference? Let us pass politely to the next paragraph, please.

I won't comment on Roud's articles or on his editorial wobbles in permitting some articles to appear as they do. (I don't mean grammatical and factual errors, which, without checking many facts, don't seem to exceed an acceptable minimum.) I'll concentrate on Roud's chief offense (the precise word): his postscripts to all the articles, some of them lengthy. In his introduction he justifies these postscripts as supplements, because he had to give his contributors a cut-off date of 1975 and because he wanted to supply bibliographical references. He adds: "Whenever relevant, I have also indicated the existence of different views." Those different views are almost always his own, are intrusive, and are often harassing of the articles that he commissioned.

Some instances. After Ian Dawson's (good) article on Ingmar Bergman: ". . . there seems to be no one (except myself) who has any doubts that Bergman is one of the greatest directors in the history of the cinema." Of what utility is *that* differing view? After Taylor on René Clair: "I would have agreed with Taylor about *Les Grandes Manoeuvres* a few years ago. Unfortunately, after a recent viewing I felt that it did not really hold up." So Taylor gets only a B+? After Richie on Mizoguchi: ". . . my own preferences go to [Yasujiro] Ozu rather than Mizoguchi; but it is only fair to say that this is very much a minority view, and one which probably says more about me than about Ozu and Mizoguchi." If that's the case, then why offer the view? Is our interest in Roud supposed to be equivalent to that in those two great artists? Roud even pushes himself into the caption of a photograph—from *Gösta Berling's Saga*: "[Gary] Carey finds 'little suggestion of the magnificence of the later Garbo' in this film. I disagree."

So these authors have been asked to contribute articles, it seems, in order for the editor to top them—to serve as the editor's "feed." Whether or not they object, the effect on the reader is worse than irritating. (Sometimes a postscript calls the preceding article "brilliant," which is differently intrusive and offensive.) Roud apparently failed to face from the start the basic condition of a critical dictionary: that it must contain many opinions with which he disagrees a little or a lot. His excuse for the postscripts on the ground that he wants to show the "existence of different views" is pretty thin: what reader would not assume that different views exist? Roud's postscripts mostly exhibit his itch to get on stage as much as possible, like a *compère* who is constitutionally unable to introduce and disappear. His insertions seem intended less to prove diversity than superiority.

They are doubly damaging. First, they cheapen the tone of the book, which was intended as a lasting reference work, with a strong taint of party backchat and journalistic bickering. (Imagine the equivalent of that Greta Garbo caption in Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.) Second, they suggest that what Roud secretly wanted to do was to write a one-man critical dictionary and that he's getting it on the cheap, letting others write the bulk of it and then coming on to set them right. The obvious comparison here is David Thomson. His *Biographical Dictionary of Film* is, as he says in the introduction, "Personal, Opinionated, and Obsessive." It's also all his. Among its virtues (and its welcome exacerbations) is its implicit continuous cross-reference: you read Thomson's article on "J" knowing that it comes from the mind that wrote the piece on "F." Roud seems to be after the same end without the same work: he wants to personalize the film world while riding on others.

But perhaps the film world is still too young to produce a mature critical dictionary, neither bland like the *Oxford Companion* (as Wood rightly said) nor internecine. Perhaps the very youth of film art makes it seem still open to critical conquest, which is what many of the contributors to *Cinema* convey. In anthropology Robert Ardrey termed this impulse the Territorial Imperative.

Much of *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* is helpful. More of it is not and was not visibly meant to be so. And this purportedly big work, projected as a massive landmark, is further diminished by its bumptious editor, continually nagging his authors and us.

***David O. Selznick's Hollywood*, by Ronald Haver (*New Republic*, 20 December 1980)**

*David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (Knopf, 425 pp.) is a pleasant surprise. Its folio size, its fold-out title page, its copper-sheeted and peephole part-pages make it look like the ultimately inflated offspring of all the lush film books of the last fifteen years. It's so heavily illustrated—1,500 photographs, 450 of them in color—that the double-columned text seems only a layout afterthought to separate the pictures. The idea obviously was to do a lavish production about a lavish producer; but to start to read the book, even to look carefully at the well-integrated pictures, is to detect real substance, which keeps getting stronger. Like so many of Selznick's films, this book about him is decently crafted and highly enjoyable.

The author, Ronald Haver, director of film programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, spent twelve years scouring archives and interviewing survivors of the Selznick years, some of whom no longer survive. Thomas Ingalls, the book's designer (who gets billing on the title-page), must have been working on it an inordinately long time, too. It can't be called a beautiful book: some of the color photos—Ingrid Bergman and Rhonda Fleming, for instances—are harsh. But its lavishness, even its garishness, are part of its being; and the many photos, a lot of which are new to me, form a concurrent text, supporting and supported by the written text. (One of my favorite shots: D. W. Griffith, aged seventy and finished, on the set of *Duel in the Sun* to visit two people—Lillian Gish and Lionel Barrymore—whom he had launched in films thirty-three years earlier.)

Haver tells us in the preface that he has seen *Gone With the Wind* over 145 times. Aside from making us wonder when he had time to research and write the book, the fact is another dank portent that the book has to, and does, overcome. He

says in his first line that he hasn't written a biography of Selznick or a critique of the Selznick films but a history of the career, and so far as that distinction can be maintained, it's true. I could have wished for even less critical comment—it's not Haver's strength—and for more biography. For example, Selznick got into films because his father had gone into them; but his father's transition from jeweler to film producer is only sketched, apocryphally, which seems a bit offhand for a matter so important to the subject's life. Still, the book, text and pictures, is a developed piece of work.

Before I get into what it develops, some reservations. The quality of the writing fluctuates like a seismograph in turbulence. Much of it is competent, sometimes it's even fluent; some of it is cobbled, and occasionally it's painful. ("These were the men who built the industry; they had their eye upon the whole and not just the doughnut.") Some of the opinions are shaky. All major films before *Duel in the Sun*, Haver says, especially those that approached its costs, "had served up the tried-and-true virtues of the time, telling stories that left no doubt in the viewer's mind as to just who and what was right and wrong." How about—to name only the one of which the end of *Duel* reminds me—*Greed*?

I spotted only a few errors. In a photo of a story conference for *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Maxwell Anderson is misidentified as George Abbott. In a photo of the 1930-1931 Oscar ceremonies, the man called Max Ree, an art director, looks to me like Charles Curtis, then the vice president of the United States. On one page we're told that *Cimarron* "had cost nearly \$1.5 million, but it grossed only \$1.38 million." Five pages later we're told that "RKO's biggest success, both commercially and artistically, was *Cimarron*."

Now for the good news, which, like the book, is plentiful. Text and pictures spill out the story of a man born at exactly the right time. It's chilling to think what would not have happened if some great figures—say, Sergei Eisenstein or Max Reinhardt—had been born twenty-five years earlier or later. Selznick is not in that league, but the very aptness of his date of birth helped him, too, to fertility and fulfillment. He was born in 1902, just as the film business was being launched, was (virtually) born into that business, and came of age just as Hollywood was exploding. The whole dearly hugged American mythology of Hollywood corruption, of selling out, had absolutely no meaning or inhibition for him. He was in love with films as soon as he was old enough to know it, and was in love with the way they were and could logically grow: he had no ambition to do anything but the same things, better.

He was a markedly intelligent and energetic boy who, at the age of fourteen, went after school every afternoon to work in his father's New York office and who wrote capsule comments on films and directors for his father. Haver says nothing about Selznick and college. In 1923 the father's business collapsed, and Selznick began to scrounge around the film world in New York. He had some ambition to be a writer, but his brother Myron, who became a top agent, was already in California and urged him to come out. In 1926 he made the move. He went to work, for a two-week trial period, as a reader in the MGM story department. At the end of the trial he was made manager of the story department; seven months later he was assistant to a top producer. Clearly the fish was in the water.

The career snowballed, through several studios and back to MGM, where, since he had meanwhile married Louis B. Mayer's daughter, he felt a particular need to prove himself. He soon shed the "son-in-law" label. His first MGM production was *Dinner at Eight*, a smash; his fifth, *Viva Villa!*, which marked the end of his first year

there, was an Oscar nominee and a modest success; his seventh was *David Copperfield*, another Oscar nominee and a huge success. The Dickens film was the first of a string that he produced at MGM and later at his own studio derived from books that he had adored as a boy and youth—*Anna Karenina*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. (Almost all of them were successful, and those made from great books reflected the high-level commercial producer who makes changes for commerce and with solemn respect.) Ben Hecht, who worked on some screenplays for Selznick, once sent him a telegram that said, “The trouble with you, David, is that you did all your reading before you were twelve.”

Selznick’s complete filmography—which includes *A Bill of Divorcement*, *King Kong*, *Nothing Sacred*, the first (and best) *A Star Is Born*, and three Hitchcocks, *Rebecca*, *Spellbound*, and *The Paradine Case*—is staggering in terms of success and of filmgoers’ pleasure. And all this without even mentioning *Gone With the Wind*. The section on the making of that film is of course the longest, and the details of the history, a quite different subject from one’s opinion of the film itself, make one gape at Selznick’s vigor and command. (Haver omits one sidelight: the search for a Scarlett O’Hara was so widely publicized and went on so long that Clare Boothe wrote a satirical play about it, *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, which was produced on Broadway, then filmed.)

The most impressive aspect of the book is that it’s the portrait of a man who, through most of his life, was happy. Happy, despite a thousand daily worries and irritations, because he was being used up in the work he wanted to do and for which he was completely qualified. His mind and taste were precisely congruent with the upper end of the Hollywood spectrum so, whatever the daily abrasions, there was no basic abrasion: there was snugness, completion. It showed in the way he operated, the Napoleonic confidence in large matters and the equally Napoleonic control of detail. When *A Tale of Two Cities* was in production, Selznick insisted that one close-up of Ronald Colman be lighted only with candles—forty years before Stanley Kubrick “invented” the effect in *Barry Lyndon*. When Victor Fleming broke down from overwork on *Gone With the Wind*, Selznick had another director on tap, Sam Wood, to cover Fleming’s two-week rest. (Selznick, working equally hard, did not break down.) And he also could make sure that Gregory Peck was shaving three times a day while *Spellbound* was shooting, because of the star’s heavy beard, and could fret, during the production of *Since You Went Away*, about Claudette Colbert’s time off for menstrual pain.

Inevitably he made his mistakes. He willingly allowed Charles Laughton to withdraw from the role of Micawber, in *David Copperfield*, after three or four days’ shooting; I am a W. C. Fields nut, but that Yankee twang of his in Dickens (as Laughton’s replacement) has always jarred. And Selznick wouldn’t go ahead on *Stagecoach*, with John Ford directing, unless Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich played the leads; so someone else made the picture. (In Selznick’s defense it might be said that he never cared much for Westerns anyway.)

There were more mistakes. But most of the major ones cluster toward the end of his career after his wife left him in 1945. The inferable reason for the split was Jennifer Jones. The inferable reason for the change in his career, of which Haver doesn’t make much, is that Irene Selznick had been a sound and needed adviser. True, Selznick was now no longer young in a business that he always said belonged to the

young, but he wasn't seventy, he was forty-three. True, Hollywood was about to move out of its old production modes, but the change was only beginning. There seems no reason to doubt that Selznick lost strength when his wife went. And, because his life and the success of his work were so tightly linked, our feeling of fundamental happiness in him begins to dim.

The only memorable picture with which he was subsequently associated was *The Third Man*, and he didn't claim much contribution to it, although he is listed as co-producer with Alexander Korda. The most notorious of this last group was *Duel in the Sun*, which is an almost too pat case of a near-menopausal man trying to demonstrate sexuality to a younger woman. (He made the picture for Jennifer Jones.) He strove so hard to get raunchiness into it that footage had to be deleted at the request of the Hays Office and the Legion of Decency, which was far from typical of Selznick's films.

Two more points. If you have thought that the frenzy level of day-to-day filmmaking work must be high, this book will turn up the dial further. How Selznick knew where he was at any moment, how he knew he wanted to revise this page of script or that hairstyle or lighting, are tributes to a secret gyroscope—a gyroscope spun by the power of the happiness that was in him for so long—which separated each hectic day into multiple discrete moments of clarity. (And while he was working on one film, he was also planning others. Haver has to handle them serially, which Selznick did not.)

And there's a central matter, one I've noted before. The persona and function of the producer have been badly skimmed in all the writing about Hollywood. The *auteur* theory concentrates on directors and often treats producers as the grains of sand for pearl-making directors. Even where that was true, the strong producers left an imprint on films as vivid as the directors'. Hitchcock, working for Selznick or anyone else, was *sui generis*; but most of the others, John Cromwell, George Cukor, William Wellman, William Dieterle, worked *under* Selznick. In filmmaking whose only real reason for being is profit, I can't see why the man with the surest sense of profitable filmmaking should not be in charge. This book is not the story of a great individual artist but of a preeminent subscriber to a system. The title is not *Hollywood's David O. Selznick*.

His directors' styles and methods were not interchangeable, but their pictures for Selznick are Selznick pictures. When he deliberately wrote a memo that caused John Huston to resign from *A Farewell to Arms*, Selznick told a reporter. "In Mr. Huston I asked for a violinist and instead got a conductor." That says it all.

Haver gets a bit carried away in his peroration. Even one who looks as dourly as I do at most contemporary American film can't agree that Selznick's "commitment to excellence and the standards of quality . . . are sadly lacking today." Every year there are dozens of American films with high production standards: that's not our trouble. And Haver's statement about Selznick's "concern for the integrity and intelligence of the audience" is a rather free translation of Selznick's often-expressed concern to *please* the audience. Still, in its look, its care, its enthusiasm, and fascinating detail, this is the best book about the old Hollywood since Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By* (which came from the same publisher).

***The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, edited by Christopher Lyon (New Republic, 17 & 24 September 1984)**



On they come, the film encyclopedias. Since 1976 we've had, among others, *The Oxford Companion to Film*, regrettably unreliable; *The Film Encyclopedia*, by Ephraim Katz, limited to people and topics—no entries for individual films—but sturdily useful; and a work that deals only with directors, the two-volume *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, which was egotistically maimed by its editor, Richard Roud. The past year brought *The Illustrated Guide to Film Directors*, by David Quinlan, with 360 three-columned pages, 570 entries, 250 black-and-white photographs; and *The Illustrated Who's Who of the Cinema*, edited by Ann Lloyd and Graham Fuller, with 480 large four-columned pages, almost 2,500 biographies, and over 1,500 photographs, many of them in (mediocre) color. Both of these recent books are, for the most part, decently written, flavorful, intelligent quick-reference aids.

Now St. James Press weighs in with the first two volumes of a four-volume set. *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, presented, says the brochure, "in partnership with Macmillan Press of London, publishers of the highly acclaimed *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*." After that citation, the brochure needlessly adds that the encyclopedia is not intended for movie fans: "we have set out to create a serious reference book for librarians and scholars." The encyclopedia is edited by Christopher Lyon, assisted by Susan Doll. The two volumes in hand are *Films* (called Volume I hereafter) and *Directors/Filmmakers* (called Volume II); they will be followed by *Actors and Actresses* in December and by *Writers and Production Artists* in March 1985. Each volume contains 500 entries except the third, which contains 700. Of the two in hand, Volume I has 536 double-columned pages, and Volume II has 611. Each volume costs \$50, but the complete set can be ordered now for \$150.

I have read the first half of Volume I and leafed through the rest. I did the reverse with Volume II. Herewith some comments.

*Selections.* No substantive quarrels here. Certainly I disagree with some inclusions and omissions: so would any informed reader. But I saw no entry—and can think of no omission—that is flatly indefensible. I admired the effort to deal with countries outside the mainstream and with some significant figures who are sometimes overlooked.

*Format.* The pattern in Volume I is, after the title, to give data about the film's production and credits, date and places of production, cost, cast, publications about the film, including the script (if published) and a selected bibliography of reviews and articles; then comes a critical essay of, usually, one column in length—500 to 600 words. With Volume II, after the subject's name a brief biography and filmography appear, then publications by the director (if any), then a selective bibliography of books and articles about the director; then comes a critical essay, often longer than most of the essays in Volume I.

These patterns are not used consistently. The reader can't rely on finding the same data (e.g., cost of a film, a living director's address) in every item. What's worse is that, especially in Volume II, there is no essay for some entries; and no reason given for the omission. Why no essays, for instance, on Grigori Chukhrai's *Ballad of a Soldier*, on Mikio Naruse, Jacques Rivette, Alf Sjöberg, or Billy Wilder? The essays are the real reason for the existence of the set: much of the factual material is available elsewhere, sometimes more fully. Why include a film or a director if the entry isn't worth an essay?

Did each contributor also prepare the bibliography for his subject? This isn't

clear. The bibliographies look helpful—I don’t pretend to have examined each one in detail or to be competent to judge every item—but here again I noted oddities. Only three items are listed for Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* The first long study of Miklós Jancsó, by Yvette Biró (Paris, 1977), isn’t mentioned. And I am credited with an article on Franklin Schaffner that I didn’t write.

*Essays.* The aim here, I assume, was to supply a conspectus on a film or director that is critical without being cranky. The range of quality is much too wide. At the highest level are the contributions of Dudley Andrew, John Baxter, Dave Kehr, Liam O’Leary, and P. Adams Sitney. At the lowest are those of DeWitt Bodeen, Stephen E. Bowles, and Louise Heck-Rabi. Most of the others, some of whom contribute a lot, float up and down within those levels. Markedly good: Andrew on Robert Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, Baxter on John Ford, Kehr on Jacques Tati. Markedly poor: Tom Conley’s gassy piece on Jean Renoir. (“No director will ever equal the febrility of Renoir in the decade from 1930 to 1940.” Even if you think of Renoir as febrile, you may doubt Conley’s gift of prophecy.)

For crankiness, see Robin Wood in Volume II, attempting to stuff Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* into a bisexual bag, with a Freudian citation to “prove” his point. In Volume I, Wood tells us that when the two fleeing prisoners in Renoir’s *Grand Illusion* sleep in each other’s arms in a ditch to keep from freezing, the scene contains “the eruption of a possible bisexuality.”

*Textual Editing.* Not careful enough. A few examples: in the essay on Roberto Rossellini, a statement about *Rome, Open City* hangs in midair because, apparently, an antecedent passage containing the title has been cut. Much writing like the following has been allowed to pass:

The plot level . . . is easily summarized. Vacillating, he changed his mind. Pitifully few women have throughout cinema history been allowed to make movies, let alone make great movies.

(How many men have been “allowed” to make great movies?)

I counted a dozen opening sentences of essays that contain the word “perhaps.” (“Rouben Mamoulian’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is perhaps the most stylish.”) Two successive essays, on Humberto Solás and Spielberg, *begin* with “perhaps.”

The proofreading is inadequate. Every reader has a subjective, indefinable tolerance of typographical errors: these books exceed mine. One page—Volume II, 365—has three typos.

If we assume that the two forthcoming volumes are of about the same quality as these two—a fair assumption since they were done under the same editors—this new encyclopedia must be accounted somewhat disappointing. Mechanically and stylistically it ought to have been cleaner. Its treatment of entries ought to have been more consistent, especially as regards an essay for every entry. The level of criticism, which is the crux of the enterprise, ought to have been higher.

But a great deal of the factual material and many of the essays in *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* are worth having in hand. One definition of an encyclopedia: maximum breadth with the most depth that the breadth allows. Here the depth isn’t relatively equivalent to the breadth, but it’s moderately close. Besides, these books, all four of them, must be seen as the start of an enterprise. The editors acknowledge that work “such as this is in need of constant revision,

correction, and updating.” So my strictures can be seen—I hope—as an interim report.

This will be the largest film encyclopedia in English to date, and that in itself is a fact of importance. A major encyclopedia, which is what St. James justifiably claims as its ambition, is a taxonomical blessing in its field and a civilizing instrument in general. The publisher and the editors have made a substantial beginning.

***Masters of Light*, by Dennis Schaefer & Larry Salvato (*New Republic*, 11 March 1985)**

I like to read good interviews. The good ones are often entertaining and, more often, instructive. A new, intelligent collection is *Masters of Light* (University of California Press, 355 pp.), fifteen interviews with contemporary cinematographers conducted by Dennis Schaefer and Larry Salvato. The subjects are all Americans or men who work often in America, going alphabetically from Nestor Almendros to Vilmos Zsigmond. It's not the first book of its kind—one antecedent is *Hollywood Cameramen*, by Charles Higham—but it illuminates further something that has been true from the beginnings of film, something increasingly valued by directors and perceived by viewers: the degree to which the cinematographer is the director's colleague—not employee, however exalted. (On *Tchao Pantin*, Claude Berri credits Bruno Nuytten as cinematographer *and* as artistic collaborator.)

Fifteen men naturally vary in opinions and ambitions. Two of the more consistent points are: the reliance of the director and the cinematographer on painting and on previous films to explain to each other what each wants to do; the close connection between the shooting of a film and the laboratory that's developing the dailies. To some of these cinematographers, a specific lab man is as important a collaborator as anyone on the set.

Here are two samples of the talk. Michael Chapman (who did *Raging Bull* for Martin Scorsese):

Angles tell us emotional things in ways that are mysterious. . . . I think a particular angle is going to do one thing and it does something quite different. . . . Angles seem the most mysterious thing about movies to me. . . . I don't have any sense that I understand them. . . . If [cinematographers] really are trying, and trying to do something for the first time, then [they] are using unconscious material surprisingly intensely. And I think one of the ways that unconscious material reveals itself is in angles. . . . It's genuinely mysterious. And I don't like mystery. . . . But there's no sense pretending that that mystery isn't there.

Gordon Willis (who did *Annie Hall* for Woody Allen):

You constantly have to keep reminding yourself and others that you have to maintain the same point of view through the movie in order to make it work as a total piece of material. . . . There are directors who go off course; there are cameramen who go off course too. But it's your job. . . . You have to keep the whole movie in your head all the time.

This is a fascinating book. Pity that there are no photographs. Stills could have

illustrated in more than one sense.

***World Film Directors*, edited by John Wakeman (*New Republic*, 11 July 1988)**

Thanks to the H. W. Wilson Company, film reference libraries are now in markedly better shape than they were six months ago. This spring Wilson published a two-volume biographical dictionary, *World Film Directors*, that is wider in scope, more detailed and balanced in treatment than any comparable book in English. Volume One (1890-1945)—that is, directors who were at work by 1945—and Volume Two (1945-1985) total 2,452 double-columned pages. Each page averages about 900 words, so the set contains about two-and-a-quarter million words. There are approximately 420 entries, each devoted to a single director—with his photograph, list of films, and a brief bibliography—so the average length per entry is about 5,000 words.

This reviewer, with only one incarnation at his certain disposal, did not take the time to read all two-and-a-quarter million words. I read the A through C sections in both volumes—79 entries—then read at random some 70 more entries in both volumes. Thus the following comments are based on a reading of about one-third of the whole.

John Wakeman, the editor, was the editor of *Midcentury Authors* and other reliable reference books. Here, again, he has been clear-eyed and firm-handed in order to provide, as far as possible, an account of each director's career that is decently written, reasonably complete, factually careful, and that conveys, through balanced quotations from reviews, a fair estimate of the director's place in the art. The bibliographies are generally very much shorter than those in the Directors/Filmmakers volume of *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* (St. James Press, 1984), but the articles are very much longer. Each entry should be rewarding to the interested general reader and useful to the student.

As Wakeman's preface shows, he is well aware that fact and judgment in the film field are somewhat more whimsical than in literature; and he has labored to keep the work's keel even through the eight years of its preparation. One statement puzzles, however: "Most of the directors in this book did not expect their films to be analyzed frame by frame, but to stand or fall on the basis of a single viewing." Did Dickens expect more than one reading of his novels? Would such an apologia for analysis be required for a literary encyclopedia? Wakeman feels that, because of the condition he describes, it was necessary to include "not only the deliberations of academic critics but the spontaneous responses of good reviewers." Not to quibble with his terms, I note that many more reviewers are cited than academic critics. Authorship itself is a bit vague. Wakeman says, "Except for a few signed articles, the book makes no claim to original research": most of the entries merely bring together already published materials. To me, the collation of scattered materials, especially when done so skillfully, is immensely helpful, but his statement leaves unclear who actually wrote the majority of the entries. An anonymous staff? The listed contributors as a group? Or both? The point matters because most of the unsigned articles are at least as well done as most of the signed ones.

Here are some notes on this welcome work, arranged by topic.

*Range.* A judiciously selected list of directors for each volume. The Inclusion/Omission game is easy to play here, as with any similar work. Why Claude

Sautet and not Claude Berri? Why Márta Mészáros and not Károly Makk? Why John Carpenter and not John Badham? The entry on Youssef Chahine says he is one of the two leading Egyptian directors, but there is no entry for the other, Salah Abou Seif. Still, starting with the premise that a biographical dictionary is not a census, Wakeman has chosen relatively well. And even though he regrets in his preface that there are few entries on Third World directors, the book includes enlightening pieces on, among others, Lester James Peries of Sri Lanka and Ousmane Sembène of Senegal.

*Length of Entries.* Another easy critical game to play with books of this kind is Sarcasm by Inches. “Director X gets twice as much space as Director Y. Apparently the editor thinks X twice as good as Y.” Admittedly, a few of the entries seem undeservedly long, like those on Robert Aldrich and Leo McCarey. But, by and large, space has been allotted prudently, not only on the basis of a director’s artistic accomplishments but also of influence or worldwide appeal. By all these criteria the four-and-a-half pages given to Billy Wilder don’t seem disproportionate to the seven pages given Yasujiro Ozu.

*Quality.* Generally high. The entries on, to select a very few, DeMille, Ford, Griffith, Keaton, Chaplin, Antonioni, and Kurosawa provide a good fundamental grasp of the life, films, temper of each. Sometimes, however, quotations are unattributed. Sometimes, even allowing for the needed compression, there are gaps in the biographies. How, for instance, did Alexander Kluge get from the practice and teaching of law to filmmaking?

*Facts.* Occasionally a waffled fact could have been fixed. Why say that Robert Rossen directed a Broadway play “in either 1931 or 1932” when ten seconds of research establishes it as 1932? But many of the entries contain odd chips of new fact—new to me, anyway. I hadn’t known that Mike Nichols’ maternal grandmother did the German translation of Wilde’s *Salomé* which Richard Strauss set to music; or that in Max Ophüls’ film of *The Bartered Bride* (1932), the circus director was played by Karl Valentin, the Munich cabaret comedian who was a mentor of Bertolt Brecht.

*Opinions.* Doctrine and quirk, which so disfigured the two-volume *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (1980) edited by Richard Roud, are virtually absent here. *Auteurism*, to name one doctrine, rarely raises its tired but still hyperbolic head—as it does in the Frank Borzage article that tells us that Borzage was “the screen’s ultimate romantic idealist,” etc. Only rarely are arguable judgments left uncountered and prickly. How many readers, for example, would agree that Dreyer’s *Passion of Joan of Arc* is “deprived of any clear sense of the various settings” so that “we are left as helplessly disoriented as Joan herself”? Almost all the articles are treated, properly, as encyclopedia entries, not personal essays, and present a just perspective.

*Errors.* First, typos. In the entries that I read, I found twenty-five. That number begins to tease the edge of toleration, especially in such an authoritative book. Factual errors—at least those that strike the eye without delving into the stacks—are rare. Some that I noted: Lawrence Tibbett was a baritone, not a tenor. John Cromwell’s fourth wife was Ruth Nelson, not Ruth Gordon. Sidney Lumet played the boy Jesus in the Broadway production of *Journey to Jerusalem* (1940), not only (if all) in “a filmed record” of the play. René Clair couldn’t have had uncomfortable “meetings” with Marcel Proust: Clair himself said he met Proust only once. Errors will doubtless be corrected in the future editions that this work certainly deserves. But future editions are unlikely to help two worries that its very merits only increase.

One of them is ignorance. Even allowing for the impossibility of seeing all the potentially rewarding films in the world, it's still depressing to read of films that I want to see and that I'll never see, either because they are not available or because they don't exist any longer. For example, Mario Camerini's *Two Anonymous Letters* (1945), which, like *Open City*, is set in occupied Rome and is said to rival Rossellini's film.

The second worry grows out of the first. More and more films are disappearing all the time—films that I *have* seen and that I value. (A quick handful: Chabrol's *Landru*, Monicelli's *The Organizer*, Duvivier's *The End of the Day*, Gilliat's *The Notorious Gentleman*.) The 35mm prints grow scarce because the films were not successful in theaters, and the 16mm prints, if such ever existed, vanish from catalogs because the rentals have dwindled. Add to these factors the success of videotapes, which narrow the market as they intensify it, like bestseller lists, and the sky really looks overcast.

Since the beginning, the basic fictions about film have been that (particularly as compared with the theater) it is universally available and unshakably permanent. Neither of those beliefs has ever been true, and they are becoming even less true. What haunts me about this fine work by Wakeman and his colleagues is its overtone: it seems almost as much a memorial as a history.

***Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America, From the 1930s to the Present*, by Anthony Heilbut; *The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945*, edited by Jarrell C. Jackman & Carla M. Borden; & *Strangers in Paradise: The Hollywood Emigrés, 1933-1950*, by John Russell Taylor (*New York Times*, 10 July 1983)**

Hitler blessed America. The enforced migration of German and other European intellectuals and artists—most of them Jews, of course—was the largest transfusion of talents from one culture to another in Western history. By now that fact is so well woven into our past that we are hardly conscious of it. The word “refugee” doesn't leap to our minds when we hear the name of Mies van der Rohe or Erik Erikson or Billy Wilder or Rudolf Serkin. All names are American names. But these people and many others were not voluntary immigrants; they fled from Hitler's Europe. They saved their lives, and they benefited ours.

America's record of hospitality in the refugee years is not exactly spotless; for quick sympathy and aid, Eleanor Roosevelt comes off much better than her husband. Still, through one route or another, many thousands arrived between 1933 and 1945, of whom almost 8,000 were professionals and academics.

Anthony Heilbut's *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America, From the 1930s to the Present* (Viking Press, 506 pp.) is a long general history built in three logical sections: how intellectuals and artists came to America and what they came from; what happened to them during the Hitler years; what happened after the war. Mr. Heilbut devotes separate chapters to Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, and Hannah Arendt. He ranges widely, discussing contributions, rejections, and acceptances of émigrés in almost every area they entered: the social sciences, psychoanalysis, architecture, theater, film, photography, literature, music, physics, and more. His approach underscores the diversity of the émigré contribution. But—this sentence almost writes itself—some sections of the book are better than others.

The opening chapters on Hitler's ascent and the travails of escape are vivid. Mr. Heilbut deals well with the interest that émigré social scientists, Paul Lazarsfeld high among them, developed in American popular culture, and he describes dramatically the impact of émigré physicists on nuclear research. The postwar activities of Albert Einstein—his protest against nuclear proliferation and McCarthyism—comprise a moving, large-spirited story. And how many remember that Thomas Mann, whose political past was more varicolored than Einstein's, emigrated once more in 1952 because of the constricting American political atmosphere? Mr. Heilbut makes these and other subjects engrossing.

But sometimes he apparently feels obliged to enunciate a dictum just to prove his control of a topic: "The characters in American literature are often as not rootless, restless travelers." That means 50%, and with deference to the American myth of the road, the figure still seems high. "Thanks largely to émigré academics, Americans became concerned with the sheer act of looking." This seems a bit dismissive of John Dewey. Mr. Heilbut criticizes Arendt's "Origins of Totalitarianism" for not making clear that "there is a big difference between attacking Stalin's form of totalitarianism and attacking Soviet Marxism." But he doesn't explain the big difference. That difference would interest numerous Soviet citizens and the entire population of Afghanistan.

In the fields of theater and film, Mr. Heilbut writes with enthusiasm and some perception of main currents, but his accounts are flecked with error and bizarre opinion. Some errors: Greta Garbo and Charles Boyer were not "refugee performers," and Erwin Piscator's first production after his return to Germany was not *Danton's Death*; it was *Nathan the Wise*. Some opinions: few would agree that the role of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was James Cagney's "best work" or that Stanislavsky's aesthetics are "claustrophobic self-projection."

The writing is sometimes naïve ("The long [German] words look burdensome on an English page, but they swiftly render a complex distinction"), sometimes flustered ("one had no cause to own—or be—a stuffed shirt"). Occasionally one would prefer to avert one's eyes: "Hannah Arendt insisted on remaining her own person." But Mr. Heilbut's passionate concern pervades the book. If he picked up too heavy a load, which sometimes makes him spill a bit or stumble, he marches on with fervor.

*The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 347 pp.) is an anthology, nineteen essays by twenty specialists, so it cannot have Mr. Heilbut's ecumenical enthusiasm. But it has a lot of discrete enthusiasms, as well as a lot of fascinating information and expert opinion. In 1980 the Smithsonian Institution held two colloquiums to celebrate the centenary of Einstein's birth. Out of them came twenty-nine papers, and from these the editors, Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden, made their selection.

Most of the contributors examine émigré influence in their fields. Boris Schwarz, for instance, says that émigré "musical performances stressed musical values rather than brilliant virtuosity, and their programs leaned toward chamber music. . . . This shift in emphasis brought about a sociological change in the concert-going public." Although foreign-born conductors had always dominated the orchestral scene, "the migration of the 1930s and 1940s brought new ideas and an unusual, very 'middle European' type of program building."

Some contributors emphasize the limits and preconditions of émigré influence. H. Stuart Hughes describes the temporary marriage between American social

theorists, factual and empiricist, and the émigrés, theoretical and anti-empiricist. He concludes that by now this marriage has virtually dissolved but that one result of it cannot be lost: “From the emigration experience American social theory emerged deprovincialized.”

Christian F. Otto, who agrees with Phillip Johnson that Mies van de Rohe “was the greatest architect in the world,” is nonetheless at pains to show that the rapid acceptance and great influence of Mies and his colleagues were due to prior American progress: “Mies had the good fortune to immigrate into a setup—a congenial, supportive context, for his ideas had been established in America.”

Overall, the Smithsonian book, as against Mr. Heilbut’s book, adjusts awe slightly but without diminishing gratitude.

John Russell Taylor’s *Strangers in Paradise: The Hollywood Emigrés 1933-1950* (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 254 pp.) concentrates on Hollywood. Although by no means all the figures he discusses are film people, in terms of its quality this might as well be a film book. It’s as poor as most film books, cobbled rather than written: Erich Wolfgang Korngold “insisted that in exchange for his large salary he should have an absolutely free choice of what films he would compose.” Surely “in addition to his large salary”? Surely “films for which he would compose”? Fritz Lang’s *Nibelungen* “was a deliberately conceived national epic.” Rather than accidentally conceived in a moment of madness?

The book collates much useful data, but it has holes and slips. The émigré film director Douglas Sirk, one of the most influential directors stylistically and one of the most fascinating biographically, gets only passing mention. Taylor tells us twice that the director William (originally Wilhelm) Dieterle played the title role in F. W. Murnau’s film version of *Faust*, but Dieterle played Valentin. Taylor says he intended his book as “a page of cultural history, which I hope may enlighten as well as entertain.” The book is more successful with the second aim.

Inevitably, some names run through all three books, and one takes on a special light. Brecht’s history in America is well known by now. But these books demonstrate, almost tangentially, that Brecht became the poetic voice of the émigrés, the bard of German-Austrian exile, a touchstone, a password. It began early in those dark years. While in a French internment camp, Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt’s second husband, invited to further confidences those inmates who liked Brecht’s ballad on the origin of the “Tao-te-ching,” which tells of the teacher Lao-tse’s road into exile:

Once he was seventy and getting brittle  
 Quiet retirement seemed the teacher’s due.  
 In his country goodness had been weakening a little  
 And the wickedness was gaining ground anew.  
 So he buckled on his shoe.

### ***The Great Caruso*, by Michael Scott (New Republic, 8 August 1988)**

When Bernard Shaw published his collected music criticism in 1932, he wrote a brief preface, saying, among other things: “There are people who will read about music and nothing else. To them, dead *prima donnas* are more interesting than saints, and extinct tenors than mighty conquerors.”

Those people at least, not a negligible number, will want to read this new



biography of an extinct tenor who is still astonishingly present. Enrico Caruso (1873-1921) has been dead much longer than he was alive, yet my neighborhood record shop, which has a section of historical vocal recordings arranged A-C, D-F, etc., has a separate section marked Caruso—sixty-seven years after his death. To my knowledge, ten previous books about him have been published in English, the last as recently as 1983. To cite a personal connection, he persists in memory with me, not only through records but because my father, when a student, was a supernumerary in Caruso performances at the Met.

Michael Scott, the author of this new book, is an Englishman who was the founder and artistic director of the London Opera Society, is a lecturer on musical subjects, and has written a two-volume work called *The Record of Singing*. He is quite aware that the title of his Caruso biography was once used for a film, but he insists on reclaiming *The Great Caruso* (Knopf, 322 pp.) from MGM for music.

In this book of 322 pages, only 198 are by Scott. The rest is given to “A Chronology of Caruso’s Appearances,” by Thomas G. Kaufman, and “A Caruso Discography,” by Dr. John R. Bolig, both of which emend errors by previous chroniclers. If you think that those two lists will not be read as avidly as Scott’s narrative, you don’t know opera buffs.

Scott’s biography itself is just as long as it needs to be. The first trouble with writing about performers of any kind is that their professional lives, on a day-to-day basis, are not engrossing. Five cities toured here, eleven there. Contracts signed, quarrels started and sometimes smoothed over. Ovations here, banquets there. Every performer’s life has its personal colors—Caruso’s more than most—but no matter what the colors, the reason for the book’s existence is that the artist spent most of his life working. The results were or are wonderful; the daily routines that brought about the work are less fascinating. Scott overcomes this first trouble with a keen synoptic sense. He knows when to dwell on detail and when to course along without skimping the transitional data. (Besides, he wants to concentrate on the art of singing. See below.) He spins his story in prose that, excepting a few purple patches, is succinct, lithe, and occasionally witty.

A second trouble with writing about past performers is that, irritatingly, they are dead. No one who has tried such writing can help resenting the subject’s inconsiderateness in not being available. This means that, in less or greater measure, biographies of past performers underline Hegel’s comment that history is an agreed-upon myth. The biographer must rely on contemporary reviews, along with memoirs, diaries, letters, photographs, and drawings. We need only remember our own opinions of some performers who have had ecstatic reviews in our own day to feel nervous about relying on past reviews. (I remember how shaken I was some years ago when an elderly actress, who had seen Henry Irving several times, said that she had a poor opinion of his acting and gave her reasons.) Then is all history of past performance false? Well, in the subjective world of opinion, what does “false” mean? At any rate, if you or I could see and hear the past performers we have read about, we would argue with some of the biographies.

Scott, obviously, has one great help against the second trouble: Caruso’s recordings. They do not completely solve the problem—or else Caruso’s physical presence in theaters would have been irrelevant—but oh, how they help. Not as much as films do for actors, but they help. The records are especially important for Caruso, not just because he was one of the first important artists to record and was the first huge success on records, but also because, as Scott shows, Caruso made most of his

records during a time of change in opera and singing.

We hear much discussion these days, often mournful, about the disappearance of *bel canto*, but the big changes in singing during Caruso's life did not directly concern *bel canto*. This term—"beautiful singing"—flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more as an aesthetic directive than a technical description. It enjoins us to concentrate on vocal quality and ornamentation rather than on content. The crucial change, as the nineteenth century went on, was not a frontal attack on *bel canto* as such, but, says Scott, the cultivation of *vibrato* by tenors as the orchestra became larger and the score more complex and the voice had to "sound" over the new orchestra. However, as *verismo* (realism) became a greater factor in opera—toward and just after 1900—the use of *vibrato* seemed increasingly incongruous. Scott: "Caruso was not the first tenor to abandon it, yet he was the first to achieve a complete success in so doing—as his records were to show."

So one of the chief reasons for Caruso's incredible survival is that his records became the fountainhead of a new approach. Tenors without number, many of them singing today, have modeled their style on his. And those of us who are non-professionals can hear where the qualities we love came from. It's as if those who love Makarova could still have a glimpse of Pavlova.

Caruso's origins and early life were as "storybook" as his career. He was born to a poor Neapolitan family, his mother's eighteenth child. (That is not a misprint.) All the previous children had died in infancy. She had three more children, two of whom survived. "By that time," Scott observes calmly, "she was forty-four and she never regained her health." When she died, Caruso left the jute mill where his father had got him a job and, having done a bit of singing in churches and amateur shows, decided to become a singer. He had a predictably rough time, singing when he could in churches, festivals, and cafés in and around Naples. He found a teacher of merit who was impressed with him and began his serious vocal education. When he was conscripted for military service, his officers overheard him singing and were so struck with his voice that they said they would release him on condition that he find a replacement. His brother obliged. The story says something about the officers' concern with music and about family feeling.

He lost his first opera assignment through nervousness at the first rehearsal, but he made his opera debut on March 15, 1895, in Naples, in an opera produced by its composer. It was not a success, but Caruso's career prospered. By the end of that summer he was in an Italian company engaged for a season in Egypt. The opportunities that helped him to speed along arose from an underlying cultural fact: during those years there were some 300 opera companies in Italy. This circumstance not only gave employment to singers but encouragement to composers. The appearance of a new opera was not, as it is today, rather like the appearance of a new planet. Much of the Italian repertory that we know today was written during Caruso's career. In time he appeared in eleven world premieres.

He worked and studied, improved his acting, lightened his somewhat dark voice (he was at first thought to have baritone qualities), learned languages. His first foreign language, one could say, was Italian: he had been brought up speaking Neapolitan dialect, sometimes incomprehensible to other Italians. He studied French and eventually became proficient, though he sang French roles in Italian until 1906. Later he learned English. He even composed the music for some English lyrics, "Dreams of Long Ago," which he recorded in 1912.

That recording career had begun on April 11, 1902, in Milan. A pioneer record entrepreneur named Fred Gaisberg fixed up his hotel suite as a recording studio. Caruso, with piano accompaniment, sang ten arias in two hours and started a fire that still burns. He went on to make 488 more recordings, 245 of which are still extant.

His theater career covered a great deal of Europe and both Americas. Since this was before air travel, he must have spent something like an aggregate of two years of his life on ships and trains. At the Metropolitan he sang for seventeen years, doing 622 performances of thirty-seven roles. In 1909 he took part in the first experimental radio broadcast from the Met. He made two feature films in New York, which were silent, of course. President Theodore Roosevelt went backstage to greet him when he sang in Washington. When he was in Berlin, Kaiser Wilhelm invited him to a private dinner at Potsdam.

In character he was ebullient, mischievous, vital. He had a liking for practical jokes, even during performances. He had a genuine gift for drawing caricatures, including self-caricatures; a collection of his caricatures was published in 1922. His love life was ample. A long liaison with the soprano Ada Giachetti produced two sons; a subsequent marriage to a much younger American produced a daughter. Those were only the most visible of his alliances.

He was generous. He bought a large villa outside Florence—odd for a Neapolitan to locate so far north—where he sometimes took care of about twenty members of his family. He gave frequent charity concerts, including many benefits for Allied causes during the First World War. (His record of George M. Cohan's "Over There" was a sensation.) Once, on a stop in an American town, he bought the entire contents of a china shop, saying, "If I come to this city and ask people to pay me \$7,000, I have to leave something for the merchants." (If you want to startle yourself, translate \$7,000 into its present-day equivalent.) He died in Naples at age forty-eight. The causes of death, according to some medical detective work done years later, were pneumonia, empyema, other abscesses, and peritonitis. He had had plenty of doctors in America and Italy, little help.

But our real concern is his immortality. His recordings are not only, for the most part, beautiful, they are historically monumental. Scott notes that, before Caruso, tenors who sang the same repertory would "have radically differed from one another. But since Caruso's day the phonograph has established his style internationally." He concludes that Caruso

died at exactly the right time for his reputation. It was not until several years later that the introduction of the microphone was to bring in its wake a whole bevy of popular singers, or crooners, whose voices did not any longer need the breath support necessary to project across the spaces of a theater or concert auditorium.

Scott, of course, doesn't contend that opera houses or serious concert halls now use microphones: he is talking about states of mind and technique and the state of the audience's ear.

I take "at the right time" to mean that Caruso was trained and grew in a music world in which recording was secondary and the microphone unfamiliar. Yet he is preserved to us by recording. He personifies a school of wholly theater-oriented voice production saved for us, paradoxically, by the very technology that has made such orientation rare.

Thus Caruso continues to enlighten us, singers and listeners alike. One of the best-known Caruso stories—aptly melodramatic—is of his first meeting with Puccini. In 1897 Caruso was booked to sing Rodolfo in *La Bohème* at a Livorno theater, and knowing that Puccini lived nearby, he went to the villa, to get the composer's imprimatur on his interpretation. The young tenor had sung only a few measures when Puccini burst out, "Who sent you? God?" How many singers, how many listeners, have thought more or less the same thing since then?

***Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein*, by Eric A. Gordon (New Republic, 7 & 14 August 1989)**

Today Marc Blitzstein is chiefly remembered, it seems fair to say, for two of his operas and his adaptation of an opera by two other men. *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Regina*, writes Eric A. Gordon in his brimming biography *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (St. Martin's Press, 605 pp.), "are destined to retain their attractiveness for future audiences because they are so solid and consistent in conception." As for Blitzstein's version of the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera*, a further patent of its survival, says Gordon, is that Blitzstein's lyrics figure in the forthcoming film (*Mack the Knife*, directed by Menahem Golan, starring Raul Julia, Richard Harris, and Julia Migenes). Without comment on the whole of Blitzstein's catalog, which I wouldn't be competent to analyze even if I knew it, I'd say that this trio of operas serves him well. He wrote in many different forms, including music for films, but these three works vividly present his gifts and his view of the world.

It was a life in music—a brutally shortened life, but one that was focused early and constantly centered. Blitzstein, who was born in Philadelphia in 1905 of Russian-Jewish stock, grew up in a warm family atmosphere, and was encouraged to pursue the career for which he soon showed ability. He studied composition in Philadelphia with Rosario Scalero, in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, who became a lifelong friend, and in Berlin with Arnold Schönberg, whom he disliked.

He also had pianistic talent. When he was sixteen, he won a piano contest and was chosen to play a Saint-Saëns concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra. In New York he became the first American pupil of Alexander Siloti, who had been a student of Liszt and Tchaikovsky and a teacher of Rachmaninoff. (Blitzstein must really have been good. Once after he and Schönberg had flatly disagreed about composition, Schönberg said, "Very well. Go ahead, you write your [Franco-Russian pretty music], but please stay in my class—you play the piano so well.")

A piano career did not follow. He composed. The first public performance of a Blitzstein work was in 1924, his incidental music for a Hedgerow Theater production of Andreyev's *King Hunger*. (Not a Soviet play, as Gordon says: it was written in 1906.) This was a "form" he used much in his life—incidental music for plays. He then went on to pour out music in many forms: piano, vocal, instrumental in various combinations, operas (small-scale).

Beginning in the early 1930s, Blitzstein wanted his music to represent the radical views that were growing in him. By 1934, in response to an invitation from Kurt Jooss to compose for the Jooss ballet, he wrote:

I have come to feel more and more that the only kind of stage-work I want to do now is one of social and political import. I should be unhappy with any other sort of theme; and I should be unsatisfied even with a ballet that depicted

conditions without exposing the social revolution as goal.

Communism slipped into Blitzstein's life, apparently, as it slips into this book, and as it slipped into much of the art of the decade.

It seems to have been seeded by the Depression, as it was for so many, and was cultivated in Blitzstein by an extraordinary young woman named Eva Goldbeck, whom he met at the MacDowell Colony in 1928. She was a writer, four years older, German-born and Jewish, who was slight yet hyperactive in many ways, including various literary activities, politics, and *amour*. She and Blitzstein were mutually attracted, though she was also busy with other men and knew he was a homosexual. By 1932 "both agreed that Communism was the goal toward which they would strive." In 1933 they married because, mostly in an asexual way, they loved each other very much. Eva died in 1936 of anorexia, but this woman, who had been omnivorous for everything except her own physical survival, remained a constant in Blitzstein's life.

After Eva, her mother, Lina Abarbanell—once a noted soprano and for many years active in the Broadway theater as a production associate—was one of the two women whose love was essential to him. The other was his older sister, Jo. She was married and a mother when, in 1929, he wrote to her frankly about his sexual being and she replied equally frankly. He then responded:

I am not shocked at your incestuous instincts; as you must know, I have known about them as long as you have—perhaps longer. . . . I have no such inclinations (I couldn't have); but I have always known that you are and probably always (ultimately) will be the most important person to me. . . . Whether or not my homosexuality can be traced to an original and repressed feeling for you, can only be guessed at.

Blitzstein's homosexual life, about which he was candid with many of his friends, consisted mostly of brief encounters, with frequent one-night pickups. He liked his sex life utilitarian rather than committed. His one prolonged relationship was with a bisexual who, Blitzstein knew, was seeing women while they were together and who eventually married. This relationship, implicitly triangular, if not quadrilateral, repeated aspects of Blitzstein's marriage to Eva.

All through his career he was interested in the blending of high art and pop. He wrote numerous pop songs, none of which had much success. In the mid-1930s he wrote a song called "Nickel Under the Foot," which used pop strophes to relate the plight of a poor prostitute. In 1935 Bertolt Brecht was in New York for the production of his play *The Mother*. Blitzstein, who had known Brecht's work since his Berlin days, met the playwright and played "Nickel" for him. Brecht urged him to write a piece that treated "all kinds of prostitution—the press, the church, the courts, the arts, the whole system." Eventually Blitzstein complied. The result was *The Cradle Will Rock*, which includes "Nickel."

*Cradle* was presented by the Federal Theater, with John Houseman as producer and Orson Welles as director. The story of the opening night, June 16, 1937, has been told several times, by Blitzstein himself on a recording of selections from his works; by Howard Da Silva, a member of the original cast, on the album sleeve of one of the *Cradle* recordings; by Houseman in his autobiography *Run-through*; by Joanne Bentley in her biography of Hallie Flanagan, the head of the Federal Theater;

and now by Gordon. In 1983 I saw an Off-Broadway revival of *Cradle*, before every performance of which Houseman read his account of the opening night.

Suffice it to say here that it was one of the most theatrical events in American theater history. For various complicated reasons, the WPA (Works Progress Administration), which ran the Federal Theater, had ruled against the show's opening at all, and the entire company rebelled against the ruling. They marched through the streets—from the theater on 39<sup>th</sup> Street where they were supposed to play and from which they had been barred—to a hurriedly rented theater near 59<sup>th</sup> Street, followed by the audience. A piano was put on the bare stage for Blitzstein, who sat down to do all the numbers. But no sooner had he started than Olive Stanton, a cast member who was supposed to sing the opening number, rose from her seat in the auditorium and began to sing. Other cast members followed suit, singing and speaking from their seats scattered through the theater until, in a rising swell of excitement, the whole work had been performed. (I wasn't there; and the worst of it is, I *could* have been.)

*The Cradle Will Rock* deals with labor strife in Steeltown, USA. To hear it again these days is to recognize that everything usually said about it is true. Its structure resembles that of Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, which had appeared two years earlier; its music sometimes suggest Kurt Weill's style, which Blitzstein knew; and it is dated. It deals in poster-plain ideas and characterizations. But something else is true. It is so full of conviction, it pulses with such feeling and fury, that it is still vigorous. Even if we now look at it through the wrong end of the telescope, we can still see that it is alive.

What it also demonstrates is that Blitzstein was a considerable librettist. His ability to write strong prose is shown in the many quotations that Gordon cites from Blitzstein's critical essays—he wrote for various music journals all through his life. But he also had the gift of writing for his own music, for singers. Except when he set to music poems by such as Walt Whitman and E. E. Cummings, Blitzstein wrote his own texts. Aaron Copland said in *Our New Music* (1941): "In [Blitzstein's] work for the musical theater he has the inestimable advantage of being able to write his own texts. (You have to know how very rare good librettos are to appreciate what that means.)"

His way with words is even more evident in the libretto for *Regina* (1949), his opera based on Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. (Obviously I'm omitting much, including the *Airborne* Symphony, which resulted from his wartime service in the Air Force.) Here of course he had Hellman's dialogue as a base, but he adapted with musical lines and shapes in his ear, rhymed when needed, often with internal rhymes, and unrhymed when the phrase or meter thrives musically on its own.

The music itself, from the fierce opening chord, is arresting. Sometimes it is a touch sentimental: the embrace of black music at the beginning and end seems more an obligatory statement of Blitzstein's social concerns than an absolutely requisite comment on the action. But moments that seem "operatic" in the play, like Birdie's reverie about her childhood home, lose their quotation marks in *Regina*. A further ironic benefit that *Regina* bestows on its source: Hellman's creaky, leaky plotting, particularly toward the end, seems much more at ease in what is literally a melodrama. The English musicologist Wilfrid Mellers wrote about *Regina* in *Music in a New Found Land* (1964):

This freshness and vulnerability, the sense of something waiting to be born, is Blitzstein's characteristic note. . . . *Regina* is a fully-fledged opera, which has

grown out of the conventions of popular music. . . . Blitzstein's great achievement is that he has imbued techniques borrowed from the commercial world with the power to hit back—to stand for, rather than against, the human spirit.

In 1949 Blitzstein left the Communist Party. It would be easy to infer—Gordon helps us to infer it—that his withdrawal was connected to the party-line *strappado* of *Regina*. The *Daily Worker* music critic had blasted the opera for being insufficiently pro-black! No letter of resignation exists; but Gordon surmises that Blitzstein, without losing social interests and without ever denouncing prior associates, was weary of “dated agitprop standards.” After leaving the Party, he signed a letter to Virgil Thomson, “Red but not dictated.”

One index of his continuing interest in social criticism was his continuing passion for *The Threepenny Opera*, which he translated. (He also translated *Mother Courage* and *Mahagonny*, but neither of these translations was produced.) He had first heard the Brecht-Weill work in Wiesbaden in 1929 and had, as some of his own work attests, never forgotten it. In addition to translating, he made some changes in the music. He reassigned some songs for Lotte Lenya, Weill's widow, and for Beatrice Arthur, of current TV fame (“The Golden Girls”). He transposed. He restored two numbers that had been cut from the original Berlin production and inserted a theme from the Weill-Brecht *Happy End*. He ended with a reprise of “Mack the Knife” instead of Weill's finale. He accommodated Weill's scoring—for twenty-one instruments originally played by seven special performers—to the available eight-man band.

The production opened Off-Broadway on March 10, 1954. It was a smash hit, but after only twelve weeks it closed because of difficulties with the theater's landlord. Due to, for once, authentic popular demand and to critical demand, *The Threepenny Opera* reopened on September 20, 1955, and ran for over six years. I saw it three times, with different casts, and wish I had seen it more. It was like a small, pointy diamond that cut through most nonsense in the theater. The original-cast album was a bestseller. That, plus the show's success, made Blitzstein say wryly that he would be remembered as the adapter of other men's work. The remark comes too close for comfort or justice.

In addition to much other subsequent composing, Blitzstein made a musical called *Juno* out of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, which closed in its Boston tryout in 1959. He promised to revise it drastically, but he never did. His last major venture was an opera on a subject that had been on his mind since 1931—Sacco and Vanzetti. Rudolf Bing of the Metropolitan commissioned the work in 1960, drawing public protests for sponsoring a radical, as did the Ford Foundation, which gave Blitzstein a grant to work on it. The composition went slowly: when friends asked him how the opera was going, he burst into rage—a fairly sure sign of desperation. At his death it was incomplete.

In November 1963—Blitzstein was fifty-eight—he went to Martinique to rest. His health had not been good. He put the Met commission aside temporarily and took other work with him, an opera he was writing based on Bernard Malamud's “The Magic Barrel.” (The manuscripts of the unfinished Sacco and Vanzetti score he locked in the trunk of his Peugeot, which he left at home. After his death the manuscripts were found by the manager of a used-car lot to whom the Peugeot had been sold.) On the evening of January 21, 1964, Blitzstein picked up three men in a

waterfront bar in Fort-de-France. Later in the evening they beat him severely in an alley, robbed him, and stripped him to his shorts and socks. The next evening he died of multiple contusions.

Gordon's biography is a loving memorial, a ten-year job done in fascinating detail and with abundant sympathy as well as balanced structure. The title itself, a phrase from *The Merchant of Venice*, is a salute to its subject: Blitzstein chose it for a book ("about music, about myself . . . anything that occurs to me") that he contracted to do but never wrote and for a lecture he gave at Brandeis University in 1962. Gordon's writing is generally adequate without being impressive. Occasionally he strains: "The muscles of his hirsute arms reached powerfully into each digit." And he mixes quotations from reviews indiscriminately. Comments by such as Virgil Thomson and Paul Henry Lang are mixed with those by journalistic gabblers. He even quotes Walter Winchell.

Gordon's empathy with his subject makes him see other people through Blitzstein's eyes. We get a strong sense of the composer's adoration of Orson Welles, for example. After *The Cradle Will Rock*, the actor-director was like a recurrent fever in Blitzstein's life. He responded readily whenever Welles called on him, as witness his scores for the Welles productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Danton's Death*—even his appearance as an actor in the film segments that Welles made for his production of William Gillette's *Too Much Johnson* in 1938. After a 1946 performance of the *Airborne Symphony* in which Welles spoke the narration, Blitzstein jumped to the podium to embrace him. In 1955 when Welles came back to New York after a long stay in Europe with plans to found a classical theater, Blitzstein wrote the music for the theater's first, and only, production, the ill-fated *King Lear*. We're made to feel that Blitzstein would have been overjoyed to be resident composer for a Welles theater.

With those people who troubled Blitzstein, Gordon makes small effort to be fair. Lillian Hellman suffers worst. Besides the *Little Foxes* connection, Blitzstein wrote incidental music for two of her plays, *Another Part of the Forest* and *Toys in the Attic*, so she was a continuing presence in his life, and a contentious one. Gordon continues the contention. He says that her five-paragraph statement in the CBS album of *Regina* is "a model of evasion passing for confession." I am no admirer of Hellman as playwright or woman, but I can't see what is evasive in that statement, posing as confession or not. She calls *Regina* "the most original of American operas, the most daring." True, after Blitzstein's murder she announced that she was going to Martinique to investigate his death, then spent three weeks on Sam Spiegel's yacht discussing a screenplay; but she did go ashore at Fort-de-France, spoke to the officials involved, and was apparently satisfied by the facts given her. True, too, that at Blitzstein's memorial service, she "cited her long, sometimes stormy relationship with Blitzstein" and referred to *Regina* as a "failure"; but the bluntness of the former may be seen as a token of regard in the circumstances, and the latter was simply fact as far as the Broadway production was concerned. (Further, in 1940 Hellman had joined the group that was formed to produce Blitzstein's *No for an Answer*.)

Gordon is also rigorous with Leonard Bernstein. Blitzstein, thirteen years older, became friends with the younger man when Bernstein, still a Harvard senior, played the piano—from memory—for a production of *The Cradle Will Rock* and co-directed the show. Through the years, notes Gordon, there were borrowings by Bernstein from Blitzstein's music: from a piece called *Freedom Morning* for *On the Town*, from *No for an Answer* for *Wonderful Town*, from *Regina* for *West Side Story*.



Gordon also says that toward the end “a part of Bernstein reveled in the sagging arc of Blitzstein’s career.” The Bernstein letter he quotes is smarmily solicitous, but “revel” seems somewhat strong. Gordon believes that “Bernstein did not even want Marc to enjoy a posthumous success,” because Bernstein refused to finish the Sacco and Vanzetti opera so that the Met could produce it. But many reasons besides spite might have prevailed on Bernstein. (And for those of us who don’t admire Bernstein’s music, his finishing touches on the opera might not have been an unquestionable blessing.)

“I have no wish to hide the kind of person I was,” Blitzstein said to an interviewer just before he left for Martinique, “for I am that person—plus years.” Yet the reader of this biography can’t help feeling that this determinedly honest man hid a basic truth about himself from himself, obfuscated it with dubious pronouncements. “I have three strikes against me,” he once said, “three things the world detests. Number one, I’m a Jew. Number two, I’m a Communist. Number three, I’m a homo composer.” But the curious fact is that, though he often made this remark, it was false.

Nothing in Gordon’s biography supports Blitzstein’s complaint of suffering on those scores. He may have suffered slights as a Jew, but nothing worth mentioning in the history of the twentieth century. His troubles as a Communist, with the FBI and with others, were negligible compared with what some fellow-believers underwent; his one appearance before HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) was in a closed session, so he escaped media publicity. He satisfied his political conscience, according to his lights, without substantive penalty. As for his homosexuality, though he was almost killed by a pickup in wartime London and though his death was horrible, Gordon offers no evidence that Blitzstein suffered from homophobia during the course of his life. In music he had more success than many other serious, heterosexual American composers.

Again in this hair-shirt vein, Blitzstein said in 1951: “For the past twenty years . . . I have been skating on the thin edge of pauperism.” This from a man who, though he never was wealthy, spent a great deal of time sojourning in beautiful places all over Europe and the Caribbean, as well as Israel. His breast-beating seems somewhat penitential, as if he felt obliged to legitimate himself, a triple outsider, with some decorum of unhappiness. But a contradictory truth underlies Gordon’s book—Blitzstein was happy.

Certainly he had miseries, disappointments, unfulfillments. But if he had been able to see himself objectively, if he had wanted to see himself that way, free of what he thought he ought to be feeling, he might have recognized two facts: he was living exactly the way he wanted to live, and he was devoting his life to the use and improvement of his talents. Forget the miseries of the day, the week, the decade: is there a saner definition of happiness?

***A Heart at Fire’s Center: The Life and Music of Bernard Herrmann*, by Steven C. Smith (*New Republic*, 1 April 1991)**

Almost simultaneously with the fiftieth anniversary of *Citizen Kane* appears a biography of a chief contributor to that masterpiece—the composer Bernard Herrmann. *A Heart at Fire’s Center*, by Steven C. Smith (University of California Press, 400 pp.), is in two respects like Eric A. Gordon’s recent biography of Marc Blitzstein. In both composers’ lives, the figure of Orson Welles looms large. In both cases, the biographer seems to feel that there will never be another book on his

subject, so he includes as much as possible. When Smith dallies over the analysis of one of Herrmann's minor film scores, we can forgive; he is loath to consign any portion of Herrmann's career to the silence that will, not unjustly, follow this book.

As it happens, I had a proprietary interest in Herrmann long before he was well known. His younger brother, Louis, and I were in a course together at New York University in the early 1930s and were friends for a while. Several times I visited the Herrmann apartment, which was not far from school, and though I never met Bernard, I saw some of the scores and books he had already piled up, and I learned a lot about him from the adoring Louis. Later, when I heard Bernard conducting radio concerts in the days when CBS had a symphony orchestra, I felt a vicarious fraternal glow. When *Citizen Kane* came along with its superlative score, I let myself feel proud.

Smith catches what many of us felt in those days, that Welles and Herrmann and colleagues seemed en route to the moon, bright spirits of a worried yet fervid decade. Smith then goes on to take us into every nook of Herrmann's career and many crannies of his private life. He is not a notably graceful writer. The title itself would be a bit grand for a life of Beethoven. The fact that it comes from a Spender poem that Herrmann carried in his wallet only suggests the limits of both Herrmann's and Smith's taste. And the text itself has moments of doubtful grandeur.

Still, many more millions around the world have heard Herrmann's music than have heard works by most of his contemporaries. Besides the *Kane* score, he wrote scores for *The Magnificent Ambersons*, eight Hitchcock films, two Truffaut films, and many others. He wrote much other music, including an opera, *Wuthering Heights*, which has been recorded, and a cantata, *Moby Dick*, which I heard but can't remember. He conducted various American orchestras and some English ones, worked hard at composing and arranging and recording, and spent a good deal of his life in anger, often distancing colleagues and friends who wanted to like him. He believed that his anger was rooted in his principles. Possibly it may also have been rooted in envy of some contemporary musicians who achieved the place and the acclaim that he wanted. He died in 1975 at age sixty-four, worn out.

It's his film music that will, perforce, survive. Smith concludes his book with the text of an interesting talk on film music that Herrmann gave in 1973. He speaks of escape from the burden of the "orchestra" concept:

If you wish first to play the music of Haydn at Esterházy and then to play it in Paris, you have to use the same kind of instruments. But music for film is created for one performance—for that one film—and there is no law that says it has to be related to concert music. As a matter of fact, such an opportunity to shift the complete spectrum of sound within one piece has never before been given to us in the history of music.

Of that opportunity Herrmann made wonderfully memorable use.

***The Phantom Empire*, by Geoffrey O'Brien (New Republic, 24 January 1994)**

Geoffrey O'Brien is a happy prisoner, battering at the bars with the hope that they won't break. His book *The Phantom Empire* (W. W. Norton, 286 pp.), awl with the force of his filmgoing experience, is a blend of protest and delight. He mixes a wish that film had never been born with a fanatical dependence on it. In short, he's a perfectly normal filmgoer but one who happens to understand his condition and can

express it lyrically.

This is no surprise. O'Brien is a poet and film critic, whose work I've been reading since 1986. In that year I clipped from the *Village Voice* an article of his about John Ford that began:

Back in my movie-ridden adolescence, when in company with a band of fellow obsessives, I shunted from double features to late late shows, life was given shape by directorial styles. There were Mizoguchi strolls in the park and Godard afternoons in coffee shops, Howard Hawks courtships and Nicholas Ray breakups. Parties, depending on mood, might be choreographed by Welles, von Sternberg, or Vincente Minnelli; the mornings after were more frequently in the manner of Antonioni. . . . [John Ford's movies,] however, affected us in quite a different way. They provided no models for style or behavior, no glimpses of what we might become—unless, that is, we wanted to become our own ancestors.

No wonder I looked forward to more O'Brien. No wonder I picked up his book eagerly.

The passage above predicted the enslavement that is his subject here. He begins his book with a fantasy about that old British rouser, *The Four Feathers*, about himself watching it. He parses the film into its precedents, its suggestiveness, its cultural echoes, its damned persistence. Then he says:

You hit the off button. But you cannot “stop” *The Four Feathers* by so crude a maneuver. It persists along with the ten thousand other select favorites, a colony of barnacles, clinging to the underside of your visual memory. It's too late, or too soon, to turn off the images.

His life has been invaded: not only by the people in the film, but by the way he has been made to perceive them, by the way this perception makes him perceive his own existence. He has turned off the VCR; still, as he sits before the blank screen,

the camera prowls around the room. This is how the eye works at the end of the twentieth century, after a hundred years of training. The camera slides through the doorway . . . the surfaces flatten themselves into pictures as it goes by.

The entire book is a series of variations on this theme—“how the eye works at the end of the twentieth century,” how, even when closed, it doesn't stop working because of film inundation. Those variations, in themselves inundating, are pretty generally brilliant.

O'Brien divides his book into eleven chapters in each of which he focuses, or tries to focus, on a theme. Two of them, “A Short History of Fun” and “Ghost Opera,” cover something of the same territory, the development of film history—with two different emphases, the first more or less on fact, the second more or less on sensibility. In both of them his effusing memory and fantasy frequently overflow the banks of the proposed theme.

The chapter that develops most conventionally (though that's an odd word to use about this book) is “The Italian System.” His focus here, for his scannings of

cinema life, is the Cinecittà explosion in the 1950s, which was partly due to the postwar re-energizing of Italian film and partly to the film business's sudden need for material to combat television. Italy, which had actually originated film spectacle before World War I, could produce spectacle again, and now with added layers of texture.

The seductive charm of the Italian fantasy epics, as they infiltrated unsuspecting neighborhoods all over the world, was the experience of watching a movie that was not a "real" movie but rather a movie of a movie, in the same way that you might find yourself dreaming that you were dreaming.

And the basic, potent formula of these historical epics?

All periods of history collapsed into one. . . . It was the final garage sale of Thrace and Carthage and Byzantium. . . . The assembly-line workers raked through what survived of the common fund of imagination, the ragged end-pieces of myth and fairy tale. . . . There would be no more local languages with their ancient associations and pungent proverbs, there would be only the indistinguishable dubbed voices: "Hey, Hercules, throw me a spear!"

As a former member of ELDA, the English-Language Dubbers' Association, in Rome, 1956, who spoke a bit of that pulpy dialogue as the screen before me billowed and bucked with galleons and chariots and bacchanals, I can attest to the sense of saturation by a Waring-blender outpouring of everything that had ever happened anywhere—in an attempt to reclaim for film, as against TV, the audience's fantasy. (Ironically, many of those Italian *pasticci* ended up on late-night American television.)

My one reservation about O'Brien's jet-flights over film history is with his definition by decades. Yes, decades—the 1940s, the '50s, the '60s—do have recognizable characteristics in dress and slang and mood, but film taxonomy is leaky. It's very easy to list numerous films in any decade that contradict its so-called definition.

Yet he is rhapsodic, not pedantic. It's amusing that at one point he notes that film scholars must be rational "to keep from being driven mad by the material they handle" and then continually dances around this warning with near-Orphic madness. It's a state to which he has been swept by even the cheapest films that have flooded into his head—particularly horror films.

But he is most certainly not that suspect creature, the intellectual who cares only for film trash. He knows very well, he reveres, the uppermost reaches of film. After talking about such works as *Ugetsu*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Orpheus*, and *Ivan the Terrible*, he says, "Civilization could be defined as the areas within which there are theaters devoted exclusively to these movies." This is hyperbole, of course, but his whole vein is hyperbolic. Anyway, this statement is cheering to those of us who worry that civilization, altering while we sleep, may have slipped away by the time we wake unless such theaters exist as one of the means to hold it fast. O'Brien mentions several such theaters that he knows, or knew, calling them "temples whose enshrined saints" were the directors "who had made the camera an instrument for photographing the invisible."

One of the directors whose images recur most frequently in the book is Fritz Lang. This is oddly fitting because Lang images recur in Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* and there is a basic linkage between Pynchon and O'Brien.

O'Brien often writes with Pynchonesque sweep. Example (long because length is the only way to convey that sweep):

You had been living for some time now in the composite world of *Blade Runner*. . . . Your destiny was to be the end product of the invention of the incandescent bulb. Night had been abolished. You ate, shopped, and rented videos in BigTown, a full-service urban franchise offering twenty-four-hour cable service and banks of vending machines stocked with a wide range of outstanding consumer products: sodium-free tortilla chips, all-natural soft drinks, condoms, pornographic magazines, and (on a lease-only basis) selected aerobic equipment. (BigTown is a registered trademark of Black Hole Enterprises, a fully licensed subsidiary of the InterGalactica Foundation.) After the harbor lights were rolled up for the evening, you bunked down inside a larger-than-life encephalogram.

One would expect that the author of those lines had passed through Pynchon and grown by it.

O'Brien closes his scintillating book by asking, "Will this empire indeed go on forever? . . . Wouldn't there be, after the glut of pictures, a deep craving for desertification?" Conceding the possibility, he conjures up people on the far side of that desert "three thousand years hence, watching *Intolerance* or *Bringing Up Baby* or *Rebel Without a Cause*. . . . Those future movie buffs" would have changed drastically "just as you, watching a '30s movie, already paid less attention to story and jokes than to stray effects of lighting and brief glimpses of period furniture and costume." He conjectures that those future people "might be fascinated by earlier phases of evolution: vanished nuances of bone structure or nerve reflex, archaic vocal patterns." He is almost jealous of those people, returning to the complexities of a film-furnished world.

*The Phantom Empire* will bring bitter comfort to the new Victorians of our day, who, along with their revived conservatism in everything from politics to sexual conduct, deplore the very existence of film as a corrupter of the sorts of judgment and taste that existed before film was invented. O'Brien's celebration of his bondage will only strengthen their conviction of deterioration and decay. He doesn't argue with these people—he doesn't acknowledge their existence. Still, though conscious of the risks involved, his book underscores arguments against such conservatives.

First, in its one short century, film has produced a body of masterworks, generally acknowledged as contributions to the world's cultural legacy by all except those who are determined *a priori* not to acknowledge them. Second, bluntly and baldly, film cannot now be uninvented; and the acceptance of this fact is a great deal more than reconciliation to change. Film at high or low level, at every level, has accomplished something impossible for any other art or phenomenon in the world. Film is the greatest commonality of the human race outside the physical functions of our bodies.

Religions divide us, usually into large groups, but they divide. Politics—international though many of us once intended it to be—is a heartbreak. But I know, as every one of us knows and as O'Brien implies, that the most secret places in myself and in Pope John Paul II and in an Argentinian rancher and in a Mongolian merchant have been touched by the same agency. Nothing else compares.

If it is complained that this agency is invasive, disruptive, possibly

cheapening, no adequate denial can be made: the charge is true. What is wrong with it is that it is incomplete. The sublimities possible only to film also exist. A price must be paid for everything. The price paid for film exaltation is a certain (in two senses) vulgarization.

O'Brien embraces the whole truth, entire. As bard for millions, he sings the thralldom as well as the enlightenment that has showered on us out of the dark. He understands that his head might have been clearer in a world without film but that it would also have been duller. As with so very many of us through the past century, he is like someone who is made in some degree miserable by love but is unable to forswear it.

He is not the first to inscribe this condition. (See, for just two instances, John Hollander's long poem "Movie-Going" or various pages in *A Twentieth-Century Job*, by the exiled Cuban film critic Guillermo Cabrera Infante.) O'Brien will not be the last. But his stroboscopic images of a mind that movies have made and remade, deformed and reformed, straitened and enlarged, are dazzling. They fuse into an aptly pyrotechnical celebration of film's first century.

***Differences in the Dark: American Movies and English Theater*, by Michael T. Gilmore (New Republic, 20 & 27 July 1998)**

Here's a curious book. It states a striking thesis. It then moves to substantiate that thesis, but its arguments are highly arguable. Nonetheless, despite rife problematic proofs, we're unable to shake the central idea.,

The title leads the way—*Differences in the Dark: American Movies and English Theater* (Columbia University Press, 188 pp.). The author, Michael T. Gilmore, who teaches English and American literature at Brandeis, has spent some time in London going to the theater. From this experience, added to his obvious prior and continuing enthusiasm for American films, comes this book.

"Using fairly conventional categories," he says, Gilmore sketches profiles of the two societies, America and Britain. He concedes that generalizations about nations are notoriously risky, yet he ventures that "Americans are the global frontrunners in technology," while "the British, though once the wedge of the Industrial Revolution, no longer signify the modern." From this, he works out that film, because it's the one art that flowered from technology, is predominant in America, while the theater, which upholds "customary values against the possible future symbolized by movies," dominates Britain. "In contrast to American cities like Boston and New York [apparently the places he knows best], where cultural life, even that of intellectuals, is saturated with the movies, in London the premier art form is the theater."

Gilmore is aware of exceptions and objections to this pronouncement. (Somewhat nervously aware. The book is studded with proleptic remarks anticipating rebuttal.) But he proceeds to deploy his arguments, ranging through politics, economics, aesthetics, and metaphysics, arguments that are both direct and tangential. For instance, he devotes six pages to the two countries' differing attitudes toward paper money—America pro, Britain reluctant—ending with "the conquest of Britain by the United States as world imperium and of live entertainment by the intangible circulating image." Thus he connects the American attitude toward easily circulating paper symbols with our liking for easily circulating symbolic entertainment.

The general social ambience in Britain, Gilmore feels, is quite different from that of the United States. "A palpable feeling of community, linking performers and

audience, and a deference to the decrees of nature, in the artistic medium that still relies on human material, the presence of the actor and actress: these were the recurrent motifs in my six months' adventure as a [London] theatergoer." He even finds relevance to his thesis of natural presence in the fact that the British never play football or tennis on artificial surfaces, always on grass. (We can sense that Gilmore, already enamored of English literature, has fallen a little in love with Britain itself. This both sharpens and softens some of his comments.)

A sampling of his other views. In a section on climate, Gilmore contends that the American affinity for film is related to the fact that American weather is more propitious for filming than British weather. "To state the matter as bluntly as possible, England lacks the necessary climate to have established a bustling film industry." Does this really explain much? What about the climate in Sweden and Russia? Not exactly California sunshine. Perhaps their film industries don't bustle, but their film histories far surpass Britain's. Patently other factors matter.

One such that Gilmore cites is Jews. Jews have been among the principal architects of the movie industry, and no country save Israel has been as welcoming to them as the United States. In the great migration of peoples from Eastern Europe between 1880 and World War I, some two million Jews deserted Russia, Poland, and Rumania; scarcely one-tenth chose Britain as their destination. In fact Britain, civilized nerve center of drama, became one of the first nations in the West to pass legislation against the influx of Jewish foreigners.

This, according to Gilmore, explains why Louis B. Mayer, Adolph Zukor, and others continued westward. But there's an oddity here in regard to the British theater. Some foreigners evidently overcame or outlasted that hostile legislation, entered Britain, and produced such theater figures as Peter Brook and Harold Pinter.

Gilmore considers American and British acting and their relation to film and theater. "In film . . . what matters is who you are, in the theater what counts is what you do." So, he opines, film is more suited to American actors and vice versa. But, for all the taciturn American personalities like Eastwood and Wayne, there have also been Brando and Bette Davis. British films have certainly had their tight-lipped divinities, but they have also brought us the storms of Albert Finney and Robert Shaw and Glenda Jackson—not tremendous global stars but certainly powerful leading actors.

Gilmore pays scant attention to a practical reason as to why British film drew more actors, proportionately, from the London stage than Hollywood did from Broadway. America is the only country in the world where the theater capital is not also the film capital. In the U.S. the capitals are 3,000 miles apart, and before airplane travel an actor had almost to choose one of two careers. Even now, opting for films in America makes a substantive difference in an actor's career. British actors have much more easily been able to lead both lives.

On theater history Gilmore is a bit wobbly. He calls the theater elitist and says: "Historically, this exclusivity has been a defining attribute of English life, and a contrast to the United States. The legitimate English theater has always gloried in its unpopularity." Historically, this is quite untrue. See, for example, Cruickshank's or Barnard's drawings of theater galleries in the nineteenth century. Or read Henry Morley on theater audiences in 1853: "The crowd at Drury Lane is a gross discredit to the public taste." And far from being out of reach in cost, the nineteenth-century theaters reduced prices for those who were willing to come late for an evening's bill, which often began at 6:30 and ended at midnight. Besides, if the London theater is

“still an elitist art attracting a well-to-do and mainly white clientele,” this situation—excepting plays and shows on black subjects—is also true of Broadway.

One point that Gilmore might have investigated is the differing national attitudes toward language as reflected in film and theater. Yes, the English theater is laced with the vernacular of Brenton and Poliakoff and others, and American film sometimes has the elaborate language of a Whit Stillman or Neil LaBute. But, predominantly, American films aim at language that is indistinguishable from the street outside, and the English theater, not least because of its alpine heritage, is a treasury of marvelous language. For reasons of relative heterogeneity and homogeneity, America is generally less interested than Britain in preserving and furthering rich, precise language.

Finally, Gilmore’s book leaves us with a contradiction. Every one of the supporting arguments for his thesis can be countered. Yet, for some reason, something in us wants the thesis to be true, whatever the facts are. If the thesis doesn’t absolutely convince, at least it teases us—toward a comfortable sense of cultural arrangement.

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